

Review of the activities of the Swedish Rescue Services (SRSA) during the Asian Tsunami Disaster.

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Executive Summary

My findings support the view that there was a delay in responding to this crisis. The delay was caused by a number of contributing factors including the lack of any clear mandate to respond to such an incident overseas, that there was no specific response plan for a national event of this type and that no crisis management team was set up in the initial stages to deal exclusively with the emergency by the government department responsible for tasking the SRSA.

This summary provides the key issues resulting from the inquiry into the national organisational arrangements in place to deal with the deployment of the SRSA, the activities that led to the deployment and the functions carried out during the initial deployment period. A number of key issues emerged from the investigation under the following three headings:

National arrangements to deal with incident

- 1 At the time of the incident there was no clear mandate to respond to the needs of Swedish nationals in a disaster overseas.
- 2 No formal plan existed nor a suitable set of protocols to deal with emergencies that required an overseas deployment other than through formal UN channels.
- 3 Partly as a result of 1. above, responsibilities between Government Departments were unclear.

Activities that led to the deployment of the SRSA

- 1 No formal request/initiation of a response to the crisis
- 2 No internal MOD crisis management team was formed during the initial decision making period.
- 3 Decision making management style adopted during public holiday period was inappropriate for a national emergency situation.
- 4 Information was not shared effectively, leading to a lack of understanding as to the magnitude of the crisis.
- 5 Decision made to deploy assessment team changed requiring further debate and delay before final decision made.
- 6 Decision to respond was not accompanied by specific operational orders.
- 7 No specific guidance as to makeup or size of first response team.
- 8 Lack of specific crisis management training.

Functions carried out during the initial deployment period

- 1 Insufficient information available before and on arrival
- 2 Initial activities uncoordinated in relation to data gathering and identifying areas where bodies were located
- 3 Arrival of Consulate Asp in Phuket provided for better coordination and more efficient working in difficult circumstances.
- 4 Coordination between consulate in Phuket and Embassy in Bangkok
- 5 SRSA effective in the field.

Supporting comments.

There was no formal initiation. No mechanism was available. The reviewer could not detect a formal request being made. It was more a case of the general weight of pressure from the diplomats on the ground, the press and the general view of the public that something must be done. The SRSA themselves also asked the question as to whether there should be a rescue mission. Information suggested that there were 20000 Swedish nationals that needed assistance.

The failure to form a crisis management team to deal with this specific crisis compounded the lack of a mandate and impeded the decision making process through the lack of direct discussion and debate that would have occurred had all interested parties been present. The timing of the event over a public holiday may explain the practical reasons behind the reluctance to form a crisis group but the lack of a specific plan or set of agreed protocols set against a series of likely scenarios is in my view the main cause for the failure to form a crisis team immediately the emergency situation became clear.

Evidence from the interviews also indicates a view that the main decision makers considered the process of informal discussion using telephone as the means of communications were adequate. This informal and formal networking (without formal meetings) may be appropriate for the normal business of government departments but is inappropriate and can prove inadequate in a rapidly escalating emergency situation, particularly one such as the Tsunami where information is second-hand and not totally reliable.

Partly due to the failure to convene a formal crisis group, the process of capturing and sharing of information was minimal. No formal method was used although some log keeping was done it was not seen as a specific task within the departments handling the initial request for assistance.

Though plans did exist for the SRSA responding to a Search & Rescue need under the UN assistance scheme, the staff who became involved in the process of making this decision had little or no training for the task in hand in sharp contrast to the SRSA staff who have extensive training and operational experience. However the SRSA staff were not involved in the decision process beyond supporting the need to respond to the apparent need of those affected by the Tsunami.

On Monday 27th December a decision was made to send an assessment group. This was then rescinded. Later in the same day the decision was made to respond with a support mission. This change of decision to send an assessment team clearly used up valuable time and created confusion and some delay. Indecision is often the result of not having a clear mandate and a properly constructed crisis management team with the authority to commit resources to alleviate an emergency situation.

The final decision to respond was not clear. The Director in the Department for Civil Defence Coordination was given the permission to make a decision late on 27th December. The director decided to respond and informed the SRSA to arrange a mission to Thailand. The details of the mission were vague and consisted of little more than a verbal instruction to 'find the right people and go'. This could have led to further delays and confusion had not the SRSA used their considerable experience to mobilise a small task force and respond.

As there was no formal plan for this type of response, the mobilising task force comprised of groups of specialists on the basis of the experience gained by the SRSA on other missions and the perceived needs of Swedish nationals in Bangkok and Phuket based on information gained mainly from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. No attempt was made to 'select' staff on any basis other than their normal professional positions within the general areas of search and rescue,

welfare and medical expertise. It was clear that this was not an assessment group and that it was intended to be an operational group.

Initial information provided to the SRSA was insufficient to provide for a pre departure briefing, therefore team briefings were carried out during the flight to Bangkok again, using insufficient information. This would lead to teams being insufficiently familiar with the likely field conditions and tasking requirement on arrival.

On arrival in Thailand initial activities of the SRSA included clarifying numbers and location of casualties and the development of a data collection mechanism. This was done without prior experience or specific training in conjunction with the Swedish consulate in Phuket.

The deployment of a full time consulate to Phuket on the 1st of January with previous experience of crisis management proved invaluable. Liaison was established with all responding agencies and formalised protocols established with the local and national authorities. The role of the SRSA became more formalised with specific tasking decided on a daily basis through the consulate. The consulate reported that the SRSA were quote: "effective in everything they did".

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Introduction

This report was commissioned by the Swedish Tsunami Commission and was carried out over the period May – September 2005. The report has six sections:

- 1 Terms of reference,
- 2 Review methodology,
- 3 Findings,
- 4 Analysis and discussion
- 5 Recommendations.

1 Terms of reference:

The review was to consider the response of the Swedish Rescue Services Agency (SRSA) to the needs of Swedish Nationals affected by the Asian Tsunami following its impact on December 26th 2005.

The review will cover the national organisational arrangements in place to deal with the deployment of the SRSA, the activities that led to the deployment and the functions carried out during the initial deployment period.

2 Review Methodology.

This chapter describes the research methodology used to provide the necessary information to fulfil the terms of reference. Practicalities such as the location and time frame in which review was undertaken are also covered in this section.

The review consisted of two principal methods of data recollection: secondary information and semi structured interviews

2.1 Secondary information

A wide range of secondary information was obtained prior to the commencement of the review. Much of this was gained by the reviewer through professional activity unconnected to the Swedish Tsunami Commission. As a leading academic in the UK the reviewer was involved with the national and international media providing comment on the Tsunami and the international relief effort. In addition direct contact with NGO staff to provide information on water and sanitation and the management of the dead was also provided in the early stages of the disaster. Further secondary information was studied by way of case study analysis and personal contact with former students of the Centre for Disaster Management working in the region affected and colleagues in the Australian Emergency Management Agency involved in the initial response.

Background information regarding the activities of the Swedish Government was obtained from the Tsunami Commission and from official Swedish Government web sites. This was supplemented by documentation relating to the structure of the Ministry of Defence, including Fact Sheets relating to planning for emergencies and the Swedish Rescue Services. Secondary information relating to the nature and extent of the damage was gained through television footage and through personal visit to the areas north and south of Phuket. Information relating to the characteristics of a Tsunami and its affects was provided by Dr Eleanor Parker of the Coventry Centre for Disaster Management a specialist in natural hazards and their effects on communities.

2.2 Semi-structured interviews.

Between a structured interview and an interview without any structure, a 'semi-structured' interview was considered the most appropriate method to obtain the required data. A structured interview is often seen to consist of a number of highly organised questions, generally with limited options for

answers, such as 'Yes' or 'No' or multiple choice. These are often referred to as 'closed' questions as they do not allow space for discussion or explanation of answers. An interview without the same level of structure will generally be comprised of 'open-ended' questions. These questions are aimed to encourage discussion, listing and brainstorming of answers including questions with 'why', 'how' and 'what' in their construction. Therefore a semi-structured questionnaire will include both closed and open-ended questions.

Due to the events after the 26th December it was realised that the response organisations under review would be under immense pressure and that a 'postal questionnaire' would result in low return rates. As a result it was decided to undertake a face-to-face semi-structured interview. A pre-formatted questionnaire was developed and filled in by the interviewer. All participants were given a short explanation before the interview began explaining issues of confidentiality, the nature of the review process. Each participant was then asked if these conditions were acceptable, once agreed the interview began. All interviews were conducted in English. The interviewees, selected as key decision makers during the period under review, were arranged through the Commission. Interviews were conducted in Stockholm in May 2005, Phuket in and Bangkok. in July 2005.

2.2 Content of Semi-structured Interviews in Sweden

Semi structured interviews in Sweden related to the activities before the SRSA were deployed to Thailand and were structured around the following themes:

- Individuals role in the emergency/disaster plan
- Training for role
- Information gathering, dissemination and retention
- The decision making process
- Liaison
- Pre departure briefings
- Team composition

2.3 Content of Semi-structured Interviews in Thailand

The semi-structured interviews in Phuket and Bangkok related to the activities before and after the arrival of the SRSA and were structured around the following themes:

Individuals role in the emergency/disaster plan

Training for role

Information gathering, dissemination and retention

The decision making process

Liaison arrangements with local emergency management authorities.

Each interviewee was asked the same initial question with follow up questions relating to the individuals specific role denoted by their seniority or role in their organisation. All interviews were recorded by agreement.

3 Findings

3.1 Sweden.

The following information is derived from interviews conducted in Stockholm. These findings represent the output from a telephone interview with Ivor Ronnback, Deputy Director SRSA, and face to face interviews with Mickael Wolfbrandt and Birgitta Agren from the Civil Defence Division (CDD) of the MOD, Larrs Johanson and Kyell Larsson of the SRSA and Per Orneus from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) carried out on 2nd and 3rd May 2005. Data is displayed under the heading in 3.3 above.

3.1.1 Individuals role in the emergency/disaster plan

All respondents concurred that they were not aware of any plan to activate a response to support Swedish Nationals overseas. All respondents were aware of the SRS scheme to provide assistance when requested by the United Nations. The response to Sri Lanka was carried out effectively within the standard operating procedures. Those involved in this deployment carried out their function in the normal way.

Those who found themselves involved in the deployment of resources to Thailand recognised that they were mostly operating in their normal roles but without the support of a formal emergency plan.

3.1.2 Training for role

Those not employed in the SRS considered that they had not received any specific crisis management training for incidents of this nature though some had experience of previous (SRSA) deployment. Only a small number of SRSA staff had specific training in handling relatives of deceased during or following a disaster. Two respondents had some crisis management experience and a degree of experience due to their role in deployment of the SRSA under the UN disaster assistance scheme through the UN Organisation for the Coordination Humanitarian Action (UNOCHA)

3.1.3 Information gathering, dissemination and retention

With the exception of the deployment to Sri Lanka there was no coordinated attempt to gather information regarding the type and nature of the Tsunami incident or the developing situation. Information was gathered and logs were produced on an ad hoc basis, some through a structured and pre arranged system in areas such as the MFA, others in a much more informal and fragmented basis. Information was retained by the organisation or department who first generated them. This included information regarding decisions made and rescinded regarding deployment to Thailand. There was no central data gathering system in place during the initial stages to support the decision process. In particular the CCD indicated that they had little information regarding the activities or discussions taking place in other ministries and felt that the information flow was "one way" i.e. from CDD to other agencies and to the Minister. Information to the SRSA prior to departure was very scarce. The SRSA indicated that information regarding the type and nature of their task does not normally come from the MFA or the CDD. There is no process for this. Information normally comes from the UN. As this was not a UN deployment no information was channelled in this way.

3.1.4 The decision making process.

With no mandate and no structured process in place interviewees were unclear as to the process and time scale of this activity. Each respondent was aware of the pressure to respond and that discussions were being held at the highest level but the exact nature of the process leading to the decision was not known. All respondents felt there was 'pressure to do something' but this was unspecific. All respondents felt that they were not in possession of enough information and that they did not have the whole picture. All respondents felt that there was a lack of understanding regarding who should make the decision to deploy in these circumstances. Because the SRSA were unsure as to their role and yet felt they should be doing something to relieve the situation in Thailand they passed the request "up the chain of command". The MFA and the SRSA believed that a decision to send an assessment team had been made during on the 27th December. This was not carried out. The CDD indicated that they were unaware of any such decision. The final decision was made by Civil Defence Coordinator who was instructed by their minister to 'make a decision'. When the decision was communicated the Deputy Director of the SRSA he felt that the role was not clearly defined and stated "it was not perfectly clear before leaving, the overall goal was to support embassy to support Swedish citizens".

In relation to the role of the SRSA Per Orneus commented that the role was not prescribed by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs "but it would have been useful if they had".

3.1.5 Liaison

All felt that internal departmental liaison had been adequate, given the circumstances and the difficulties of communication over the holiday period. Liaison had also been good with agencies that would normally work together. The MFA felt that there had been poor liaison between themselves and the Embassy in Bangkok particularly in respect of details to effect a response. CCD commented on lack of liaison with MFA with specific reference to the decision to send SRSA and the nature of the mission. SRSA felt liaison in Sweden was in accordance with their normal operating processes and therefore was satisfactory. This was corroborated by the CDD and MFA.

3.1.6 Team Composition

Team composition was decided by SRSA. This was done on the basis of the information available, described as 'minimal', and the experience of the staff who had been deployed overseas on numerous occasions. There was no selection of personnel from the agencies approached. Each agency was asked to propose staff on the basis of their professional training. Principally psycho-social and medical. They approached agencies such as the Red Cross. All who were deployed volunteered. The task force included a number with experience of earthquakes but some who had never been abroad.

3.1.7 Pre departure briefings.

All respondents felt that the pre departure information was minimal. The MFA felt that they could have had a greater input into this area using their experience and information to hand. The SRSA commented that they did not have a clear picture of the initial task thus making it difficult to brief responders beyond basic details of situation and an outline of the task i.e. "to assist the Embassy to help Swedish nationals in Thailand and in particular the area of Phuket". Formal briefing carried out by trained SRSA staff on plane during journey to Bangkok with a further more detailed briefing on arrival at Phuket.

3.2 Thailand

The following information is derived from interviews conducted in Bangkok and Phuket. These findings represent the output from a face to face interview with Christer Asp, the consulate in Phuket, Stellan Berg, Counsellor Administrative and Consular Affairs and Christer Holtsberg of Sida during the period 25th-27th June 2005.

3.2.1 Individuals role in the emergency/disaster plan

Embassy staff (ES) indicated that there was a no specific plan existed for this type of event but a general framework existed to support Swedish nationals for a wide range of issues that occurred on regular basis. The ambassador had some experience of responding to a crisis resulting from the Bali bombing. Christer Asp (CA) (who arrived in Phuket on 1.1.2005 to relieve the

Ambassador who had travelled down to Phuket on 26th Dec. to manage incident from the Consulate) had experience of earthquakes in Turkey.

3.2.2 Training for role.

ES reported that they had no training for disaster management nor any specific briefings related to the type and nature of this type of natural phenomena. CA had some experience of crisis management and felt that this had provided him with some ability to develop a crisis coordination group in order to manage a situation. He stated that he had had no specific training in Disaster Management.

3.2.3 Information gathering dissemination and retention.

ES reported that the Embassy had been heavily involved in gathering information and relaying this to Sweden and to and from Phuket. The Embassy set a 24hr staffing arrangement using both staff and volunteers to handle the missing persons bureaux. They indicated that there had been much overlap between organisations. Ad hoc briefings were arranged during the first week. These became more organised and regular as the initial emergency evolved into the management of families etc. travelling to Thailand to find missing family members or to visit the place where their loved ones died. CA reported how initial hand over and then continual daily (formal) briefings were conducted. These were based on the work of the SRSA travelling around the district, collecting and collating information about bodies. Later this became information collection and collation relating to visiting families etc. The information was formally recorded and passed to the Embassy and Sweden through formal channels. Information gathering and daily briefings were carried out throughout and were still in place during our visit. CA reported that considerable information dissemination to the public, particularly in Sweden, was carried out by using the press.

3.2.4 The decision making process.

The ES reported that in the emergency phase the embassy played a supporting role to the Ambassador in Phuket and therefore the crisis management team was a "semi formal arrangement" with occasional

briefings. Systems evolved rather than being created to deal with a specific set of issues.

CA reported that from the 1st of January he developed a 'crisis management structure' through arranging twice daily briefings which became tasking and feedback sessions. The SRSA were in the forefront of these meetings organising the operational activity needed to fulfil the strategic and tactical decisions made at the briefing meetings. It was stressed at these meetings that no organisation should "step over their own competences". CA reported that it was evident that the SRSA were very adept at forecasting future needs and activities and frequently had resources and staff on standby to respond to the needs identified in the briefing meetings. Using their experience in this way frequently reduced response times and created an air of efficiency, generating confidence in the work of the Consulate with the Thai authorities. CA reported that the SRSA were "efficient in everything they did". CA stated that his position as coordinator was never challenged and that his authority to make decisions and direct operations was readily accepted by all the responding Swedish organisations.

3.2.5 Liaison arrangements with local emergency management agencies.

ES reported that this had at times been chaotic. Initially too much information was being channelled into the Embassy with too few staff to receive, prioritise and disseminate. Liaison through formal channels had however continued without difficulty. No obstruction was encountered other than the sheer volume of information/demands and the confusion of the situation in the early part of the disaster.

CA reported that on the initial confusion of the disaster liaison was difficult to establish and some confusion existed. The SRSA initially worked beyond their jurisdiction in gathering information from hospitals etc. this was very necessary in the initial stages when no specific liaison arrangements had been set up. This activity did not create any diplomatic issues. Liaison with the Thai authorities were quickly established after the 1st January. Regular daily meetings were arranged. With regular contact many personal working

relationships were forged allowing speedy resolution of problems as they arose.

4 Analysis and discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the information gathered during the two sets of interviews. It will first give an overview of the situation as it relates to the response by the SRSA to the Asian Tsunami, followed by specific analysis and discussion relating to national arrangements to deal with an incident of this type, activities that led to the deployment of the SRSA and the functions carried out during the initial deployment period.

4.2 Overview

My findings support the view that there was a delay in responding to this crisis. The delay was caused by a number of contributing factors including the lack of any clear mandate to respond to such an incident overseas, that there was no specific response plan for a national event of this type and in particular the failure to recognise the need to develop a crisis management team in the initial stages to deal exclusively with the emergency by the CDD of the MOD who were responsible for tasking the SRSA. It was also evident that no formal request for assistance had been made and that the 'pressure to act' came from members of the SRSA, the media and other government officials who believed that it was their duty to send a mission.

These three key issues combined with the staffing issues over a holiday period, the poor liaison between key departments and the perceived lack of direction from Government led to the decision being delayed. A further complication, seemingly only recognised by some of the respondents, was the decision to send an assessment team early on the 27th December only then to rescind this decision later in the day. This apparent indecision only added to the confusion and inevitable delay. The final decision to deploy a mission to Phuket to support the Ambassador in his work managing the needs of Swedish nationals did not contain a specific set of operational objectives and

appeared to all those involved in the preparation for departure as a vague instruction. Indeed the instruction was not derived at ministerial level but delegated to the Director in the Department for Civil Defence Coordination who then had to make the actual decision to send a mission. Deciding who and how many should go on this mission was then delegated to the SRSA using their experience of previous missions as the basis of their team selection. The initial work undertaken by the SRSA was in line with the remit from the Director General Christina Salomonsson (dated 27th December) of liaison, health care and trauma management but quickly changed direction to become assisting with the initial reporting of where bodies had been collected, repatriation and assisting families to visit sites where their relatives had died or were last known to be. After initial liaison difficulties this work was carried out in an exemplary manner.

4.3 National arrangements to deal with incident

At the time of the incident there was no clear mandate to respond to the needs of Swedish nationals in a disaster overseas. This clearly created difficulties for the SRSA, the MFA and the CDD who discussed a mission at some length but had no formal conduit through which to pass a request. No budget provision was therefore immediately available and without ministerial intervention none could be authorised. As no mandate was in place therefore no specific plans existed to deal with the situation. Other arrangements for deploying the SRSA exist and a Search and Rescue mission to Sri-Lanka was properly initiated following a formal UN request. There is therefore a planning basis for deployment that has a range of set protocols that are regularly used and which could form the basis of any deployment and, as we shall see later, did underpin the mission sent to Phuket.

It was clear that there was uncertainty between departments as to where the responsibility for such an unusual mission may sit. There was clearly difficulty in communicating and discussing this issue between the main government departments involved. This was compounded by the shortage of staff over the holiday period and the dispersed nature of those who were dealing with the situation. Closer working arrangements (discussed later) may have reduced

this uncertainty and shortened the time it would subsequently take to make the decision to deploy.

4.4 *Activities that led to the deployment of the SRSA*

4.4.1 *Initiation*

Information received from the MFA indicated that no formal request was received from the Embassy in Bangkok or from the Ambassador in Phuket. This was reinforced by all the other agencies interviewed. This lack of an initiation process clearly caused considerable difficulties in later determining whether a mission should be sent. There was therefore no specific requirement identified, no list of requirements, and no brief on the conditions that would be faced by the teams when they arrived. This may be as a result of not having a mechanism or merely the assumption by all concerned that someone else had already made a request for help. The disruption to the normal working arrangement on the ground and the inevitable disruption to and loss of communications all added to the confusion.

The stimulus to send a mission therefore came from the senior management of the SRSA and officials within the MFA. This was reinforced by public concern and the pressure exerted by the media. Reports indicated that 20000 Swedish nationals may be involved and that significant numbers may have died or be seriously injured and require assistance. However without a formal mandate or a formal request it is understandable that uncertainty and confusion would exist with those who may be responsible for decisions of this type.

4.4.2 *MOD Crisis Management*

Notwithstanding the fact that no mandate or plan existed, the key factor that led to the many difficulties expressed by the interviewees was the failure to form a crisis management group that included all of the necessary stakeholders. Had this been formed it would have alleviated many of the problems identified in Chapter 4. For example, Liaison, had all stakeholders been present for a detailed discussion issues relating to departmental

protocols and roles and responsibilities could have been aired, discussed and resolved. This could have led to an agreed plan of action detailing the precise nature of the crisis and the interventions planned. It could also have provided coordinated information gathering, sharing and recording. Furthermore, a coordinated approach to senior members of the Government would have provided more detailed and relevant information from a more informed source to speed up the decision making process.

In the case of deployment, a coordinated approach employing the skills of the experienced members of the SRSA and input from the MFA would then have given rise to a more specific and detailed remit for the deployment of a mission. Incorporation of smaller specific functional groups working in tandem with the main crisis management team would have reduced the time frame for gathering together the appropriate response team through placing responding groups on standby even before the final decision was made.

The decision to deploy an assessment team was clearly not properly transmitted to the CDD. The subsequent cancellation of this decision is a typical example of confusion that can exist when there is no formal crisis group representing all stakeholders. These two decisions absorbed time and energy that could have been used to better effect and which no doubt extended the time it took to make the decision to deploy a rescue mission. The management of major disasters and international incidents of this nature must be dealt with through a coordinated approach by all departments involved. The 'silo' approach where departments work in isolation and not towards a common goal are rarely successful in a crisis situation.

The final decision to respond was not clear. The Director in the Department for Civil Defence Coordination was given the permission to make a decision late on 27th December. The director decided to respond and informed the SRSA to arrange a mission to Thailand. The details of the mission were vague and consisted of little more than a verbal instruction to 'find the right people and go'. This could have led to further delays and confusion had not the SRSA used their considerable experience to mobilise a small task force and

respond. The MFA felt that they would have been able to provide much additional information but were not consulted. Again the failure to liaise created a situation that may have reduced the effectiveness of the mission.

4.4.3 Management style

Evidence from the interviews indicate a view that the main decision makers considered the process of informal discussion using telephone as the means of communications were adequate. This informal and formal networking (without formal meetings) may be appropriate for the normal business of government departments but is inappropriate and can prove inadequate in a rapidly escalating emergency situation, particularly one such as the Tsunami where information is second-hand and not totally reliable. This form of communication also leads to decisions being made without the full consultation necessary. Views are not expressed outside of the conversation and decisions are made with incomplete information and no lateral communication. This attitude may be a direct consequence of the lack of training and exercising for crisis or disaster management exacerbated by the initial lack of understanding who the key stakeholders are (or should be).

4.4.5 Information flow

Partly due to the failure to convene a formal crisis group, the process of capturing and sharing of information was minimal. No formal method was used although some log keeping was done it was not seen as necessary to share this information outside the departments handling the request for assistance. It is imperative that information regarding the type and nature of any incident is shared information, typically these days done over a secure, pass word protected, intranet site within the organisation. A system such as this would have also facilitated knowledge sharing regarding decisions and actions being made by other departments.

4.4.6 Deployment

Though plans did exist for the SRSA responding to a Search & Rescue need under the UN assistance scheme, the staff who became involved in the

process of making this decision had little or no training for the task in hand in sharp contrast to the SRSA staff who have extensive training and operational experience. However the SRSA staff were not involved in the decision process beyond supporting the need to respond to the apparent need of those affected by the Tsunami. As there was no formal plan for this type of response, the mobilising task force comprised of groups of specialists on the basis of the experience gained by the SRSA on other missions and the perceived needs of Swedish nationals in Bangkok and Phuket based on information to hand. No attempt was made to 'select' staff on any basis other than their normal professional positions within the general areas of search and rescue, welfare and medical expertise. Some of the 'normal' team members were identified such as team leaders and crisis support staff. The process underlying the collection and preparation for departure was carried out in the normal way of any deployment. It was clear that this was not an assessment group and that it was intended to be an operational group. This diverse group was probably not ideal but in the circumstances, with the uncertainty of the requirement and with the insufficient brief, would have been difficult to provide the specific mix that, with hindsight, would have been needed.

Information from the SRSA also indicates that the plane taking the mission to Bangkok was not full. It is clear that the staff taken (and their equipment) was at the time though to be sufficient for the task they assumed they were to perform. However if the SRSA team leader had either been given more information or (as a result of training or his own initiative) gained further information on the type, nature and extent of the disaster then a more complete team could have been deployed therefore providing a more robust initial mission.

Initial information provided to the SRSA was insufficient to provide for a full pre departure briefing. Much of the information came from TV and other media sources. Further information had to be sought and did not come through formal channels. Team briefings therefore were carried out during the flight to Bangkok again, using insufficient information. This would lead to teams being insufficiently familiar with the likely field conditions and tasking requirement on

arrival. Further briefings on arrival at Bangkok and later at Phuket enabled the teams to gain a better understanding of the situation and their likely role. However the situation was far from ideal. The impact of such a wide area disaster with such enormous loss of life would have had a serious effect on untrained and inexperienced staff. It is unclear to what extent this first group were given support during and/or after their mission. Exposure to such traumatic scenes can have a detrimental effect both on performance in the field and longer term when returning to normal activity. This must be planned for and suitable training and support given to all staff deployed in this way.

4.5 Initial deployment period

On arrival in Thailand initial activities of the SRSA included clarifying numbers and location of casualties and the development of a data collection mechanism. Much of the work carried out was without any specific training and relied on the staff using their experience and general skills in logistics management and assessment techniques gained through previous deployments (in a search and rescue context) to gather information. Some of the information gathering in the early stages was carried out by the SRSA without prior knowledge of the Thai authorities mainly due to the confusion caused by the situation. Access to some areas was therefore gained without express permission and created some difficulty with the local authorities. This was quickly resolved when a full time consulate was deployed to Phuket on the 1st of January. Christer Asp had previous experience of crisis management and swiftly developed and extended the liaison arrangements with all responding agencies through the establishment of formalised protocols with the local and national authorities.

The ability of the SRSA to judge the logistical needs of the evolving situation and to be able to procure the necessary resources proved to be a valuable skill, born no doubt out of their experiences in earthquake scenarios where resource procurement is essential to the success of a mission. The Consulate in Phuket clearly indicated his view that the SRSA with their specialist and general skills combined with their flexibility to adapt to all kinds of situation were an invaluable asset. During this period the role of the SRSA became

more formalised with specific tasking decided at the twice – daily crisis management meetings chaired by the consulate. The consulate reported that the SRSA were quote: “effective in everything they did”.

This type of comment is not surprising as all the SRSA would have been operational Fire and Rescue personnel and are likely to have had some experience of deployment overseas prior to this event. The training and operational experience gained within the Rescue Service generally creates personnel who are flexible and adaptable and provides training skills to enable them to create solutions to problems that arise during operations. This form of training and level of skills does though need to be nurtured and extended for deployment where close working relationships are needed with the local authorities and where a sensitive approach is needed when dealing with the bereaved families.

In relation to the speed of response to Phuket it is interesting to note that had the SRSA mission arrived twenty four hours earlier they would have been faced with a situation of utter confusion and chaos. It is unlikely that the mission would have been able to make any form of impact to the overwhelming needs of that time. One the day of their arrival though the situation was still one of some chaos and confusion, as is typical in these type of situations, it was noticeably better than the day before, thus enabling the mission to begin their work without further delay.

5 Recommendations

These recommendations are based on the results of this particular inquiry and do not reflect on any of the other inquiries underway or completed in relation to the Asian Tsunami. The recommendations reflect good practice and are in line with current practices in other European countries.

- 1 The Swedish Government should consider preparing a national level plan to enable a range of responses to be made to disasters occurring overseas that may impinge on Swedish nationals either directly or indirectly. In doing so the planning process should take account of the

nature and type of incidents that might occur and develop robust arrangements that can be put into effect at any time. The plan should also be able to react to unforeseen incidents and provide a platform for rapid decision making where a specific plan does not exist.

- 2 In concert with the implementation of 1 above, key members of the departments identified within the plan should be provided with the necessary training to prepare them for their specific role within the plan. This may range from no more than a briefing of their roles and responsibilities to some senior or role critical staff attending a specific training course in crisis management with regular updating and refresher training to maintain a high degree of readiness.
- 3 On completion of the plan and the necessary personnel training a thorough audit of the plan should be carried out including a realistic, real time, real resource exercise to test the arrangements.
- 4 Further training should be given to the SRSA in light of the lessons learned through their formal debrief techniques currently being employed for staff returning from missions to Phuket.
- 5 Senior embassy staff should be given training in the type and nature of risks that exist in their areas of deployment. In addition they should also be made aware of crisis management techniques to ensure that they would be able to provide the necessary initial response and assistance in wide scale emergency events. A simple action plan should be produced at each embassy based on the predictable scenarios for the area of responsibility. All embassy staff should be made aware of the plan, its contents and their specific role within it.

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