

## Lack of co-ordination hits housing hardest

By Shawn Donnan in Jakarta

Published: December 23 2005 02:00 | Last updated: December 23 2005 02:00

In coming months the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies will - if all goes to plan - spend \$100m to distribute and to erect 20,000 temporary homes with galvanised steel frames and wood-plank walls across the tsunami-devastated Indonesian province of Aceh.

The praiseworthy goal is to get nearly 70,000 people still living in dishevelled tents a year after the tsunami disaster into sturdier structures from which they can move on with their lives. But, a year after the tsunami, aid experts say the decision also looks like a costly late fix to one of the biggest shortcomings in the world's response to last year's tsunami disaster.

In Indonesia, the country worst affected by the disaster, the bureaucracy-burdened transition to long-term reconstruction did not include a big push to build what disaster experts call

"transitional shelter". These are the homes survivors of natural disasters need in the medium term as they wait for permanent homes that may take years to rebuild. As disaster wonks ponder the lessons of the tsunami, the need for viable transitional housing options in responding to future disasters is a priority.

"We need to understand the sheltering as a continuing process rather than something that has separate and distinct phases," says Johan Schaar, the IFRC's top official for the tsunami.

According to Mr Schaar the need for transitional housing was identified in the weeks after the disaster. But what he calls "the pressure and ambition" that accompanied the tsunami and the record sums donated - more than \$13bn, according to UN figures - caused many aid agencies to focus on building permanent homes after what was deemed the "emergency phase" of the disaster response was over.

The reason in part, Mr Schaar says, was lack of leadership.

There was no one agency co-ordinating the housing response. That, he says, may change in future disasters, with the UN giving the IFRC that role.

Sri Lanka, too, had problems with transitional housing. A July report by the UNHCR, the UN's refugee body, found "significant" numbers of transitional homes fell below government standards and called for an intense improvement campaign.

ADVERTISEMENT



Mr Schaar cautions against seeing the tsunami as a "representational" natural disaster. "It was exceptional in all respects," he says. But a lack of medium-term housing was not the only problematic element in the aid world's response.

Aid workers from the outset pointed to what they said was poor co-ordination of the relief effort and agencies often poured into high-profile areas, leading to what the Red Cross in its 2005 disaster report called a "scramble for beneficiaries".

Tons of aid flooded into Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and other tsunami-affected countries, often without anyone asking local officials what was needed. The result, the Fritz Institute, a US think-tank, pointed out in a report this year was "mountains of used clothing and inadequate medical help". As the FT reported, hundreds of containers of often unneeded aid given in the days after the tsunami were left stranded on docks in Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

Eric Schwartz, deputy to former US president and UN tsunami envoy Bill Clinton, says the disaster also highlighted the fact that the system the international community has for humanitarian aid "hasn't been as well-replicated" in areas such as reconstruction.

Among the lessons, he argues, is the uncomfortable fact that "development has winners and losers" with some tsunami survivors receiving far more generous help than others. "That creates the potential for social tension and it can exacerbate inequities," he says.

But to others the issue that stands out most today is housing - and the fact that only in recent months has any concerted international push been made to shift people from tents in places like Aceh.

Worthy as that goal is, the question now, aid experts say, has to be whether the Red Cross should be moving people into transitional shelters a year after the disaster, especially at such great expense. The cost of building the 20,000 26sq m "transitional" shelters, with the appearance of large garden sheds is, in fact, the same as building the same number of brick permanent homes, 78,000 of which are due to go up in Aceh next year.

"We should be doing permanent housing," says Diane Johnson, who leads international aid agency Mercy Corps' south Asian and south-east Asian operations. And she adds that "\$100m is huge money, even in the tsunami".