

# San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

## CATASTROPHE IN ASIA: One Year Later

### Pace of recovery slow in tsunami-ravaged region

### BAY AREA: Volunteers committed to help in rebuilding of destroyed communities

BY Janine DeFao, Chronicle Staff Writer

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A year after a towering wall of water wiped out entire communities in South Asia and killed 223,000 people, the devastation, for many Americans, has been eclipsed by other disasters more recent and closer to home.

Not so for a number of Bay Area volunteers who continue to toil in a region still far from recovery on the anniversary of the Indian Ocean tsunami, whose destruction touched 10 countries on two continents.

"Most of us would think that's beyond us, that now we have to worry about (Hurricane) Katrina and (the Oct. 8 earthquake in) Pakistan," said Lynn Fritz of San Francisco's Fritz Institute, who returned from tsunami-ravaged southern India a week ago. "I emphatically want to say that is not the case."

A recent survey of tsunami victims by Fritz's organization, which helps aid agencies become more efficient, found that most victims were still living in temporary housing -- including all of those surveyed in Indonesia -- and most had lost more than half their income.

"I was personally taken aback by just how impacted these people continue to be," said Fritz, who first visited the region soon after the tsunami and returned to host a conference for aid workers and officials to assess their response. "A year later, they are reminded of the reality every day, every hour. They are still living in these conditions. Their income is impacted. Their family is still lost."

Fritz said the slow recovery didn't mean aid organizations had failed but reflected the vast scope of the destruction.

While the tsunami generated an unprecedented amount of giving internationally, much of the funds remain to be spent as governments, relief organizations and others make the transition from emergency relief to rebuilding a huge region that in many areas was reduced to rubble.

Disasters such as Katrina have shifted both the spotlight and donations away from the tsunami area.

"The funding for the tsunami has trickled off dramatically," said Bruce Burtch, a spokesman for the American Red Cross' Bay Area chapter. But he said Americans, and Bay Area residents in particular, had been tremendously generous. Americans donated \$569 million to the Red Cross for tsunami relief, \$11.8 million from the Bay Area.

"It might be off the immediate radar, but the work is still ongoing," said Burtch, who added the Red Cross continues to bring water, sanitation and measles vaccinations to the affected areas.

Bodhi Garrett, a former Bay Area resident who established a relief organization in his adopted home of Thailand, said "definitely resources have dried up."

"But that, in a sense, is appropriate," said Garrett, 27, in a phone interview

from Thailand. "It's no longer disaster relief. It's community building."

Garrett, who grew up in Carmel Valley and graduated from UC Berkeley with degrees in environmental science and economics, had been living for a year in Thailand doing sea turtle conservation and working for an eco-tourism resort on the island of Koh Phratong in the Andaman Sea.

He had returned home for Christmas last year three days before the tsunami hit.

"At first, it was disbelief," Garrett said. "Then it was the realization I'd lost a lot of friends." Thirteen of his friends at the resort died in the tsunami.

Garrett returned to Thailand within two weeks to find the resort and nearby fishing villages destroyed.

"I don't really feel I had a choice," Garrett said of his decision to return. "These were the communities I had lived with and the friends I had made."

A Thai friend lost 14 family members to the thundering waves.

In another village, every resident was killed except for two who climbed trees. One official who visited the spot said there was no sign anyone had ever lived there.

Within days, Garrett and other volunteers had established North Andaman Tsunami Relief. The group is working in 12 villages to help restore self-sufficiency, from repairing fishing boats to

encouraging local handicrafts such as paper- and soap-making to working with local residents to develop sustainable tourism. The organization also teaches English and computer skills and provides scholarships.

"People's lives are getting back to normal, and hope is returning," Garrett said.

A number of current UC Berkeley students also have done work in the area. Three different groups of graduate students traveled to Thailand and Sri Lanka this spring and summer to bring water treatment systems, advise officials on eco-tourism and help develop sustainable businesses.

The tsunami even prompted Santa Cruz resident Shelly Chambers, 38, to quit her software job and form an organization, now called the Rowan Group, to help volunteers connect with opportunities to assist in the region battered by the waves.

Some 100 people from throughout the world have found volunteer work from boatbuilding and furniture-making to

construction and child care though the efforts of Chambers and two friends she met through Craigslist. But she said she had received only three e-mails from would-be volunteers since Hurricane Katrina hit.

"People should know there is still a lot of devastation," said Chambers, who spent half of the past year in Thailand and will return this week. However, she said, the picture is mixed, with some tourist areas on the mend.

"As much as they do need help with building, they really do need the tourists back," she said. "That is so key to their economy."

Other Bay Area residents have pitched in from home by opening their wallets.

The Hindu Community and Cultural Center and Shiva-Vishnu Temple in Livermore raised \$100,000 for tsunami relief and are funding projects by three organizations in India that will start next month.

A temple member initially traveled to the southern Indian state of Tamil

Nadu and purchased \$10,000 in relief supplies, but members wanted to make sure to contribute to the area's long-term recovery, said Vidya Ananth, chair of the human services committee.

Local funds will help build homes and a school and start a mobile clinic to serve more than 50 villages in southern India, which is being battered by rains this year, making rebuilding difficult. One organization also will teach yoga and meditation to tsunami survivors, to "help them physically and emotionally," Ananth said.

Garrett said there had been some unintended consequences of all the aid, creating dependency on handouts in some cases and disappointment in others when promised relief fell through.

"In reality, there were three tsunamis -- the physical wave, the ensuing flood of relief aid, and now the withdrawal of that relief," he said. "One of our biggest tasks is to help (villagers) make the transition from crisis relief to post-tsunami development."

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