



### F26 Thai Tsunami - Lessons for DVI Managers

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The goals of this presentation are to increase understanding of unfamiliar aspects of DVI in an offshore situation and to provide strategies and tools to implement this increased awareness.

This presentation will demonstrate enhanced analysis of issues that will allow increased understanding of specific aspects of DVI management in mass casualty incidents offshore. This is aimed at facilitating co-operation at an international level and contributing to efficient and timely return of accurately identified human remains to families.

The Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) operation in response to the Boxing Day Tsunami or Thai Tsunami on the south west coast of Thailand on December 26 2004 is examined. Four issues that inform planning decisions for DVI managers of future incidents of this scale are discussed. These are cultural, jurisdictional, credentialing and the relative rates of identification between standalone methods of identification.

**Cultural:** This event took place in the Kingdom of Thailand. All DVI workers were guests of the Thai people. A sensitivity to Buddhist and Thai cultural issues needed to be maintained and incorporated at all levels of DVI activity. This sensitivity informed an understanding of such issues as: the role of monks; the reluctance to allow transport of bodies from one province to another across a waterway; apparently differing command and loyalty relationships within the Royal Thai Police in different provinces; the timing of the response during a national election; mortuary practices of one nation being offensive to many others; the inappropriate display of the national flag of one nation; and the constant awareness by Thai officials that the number of Thai citizens identified was miniscule in comparison to the numbers of foreigners identified.

**Jurisdictional:** The host country has jurisdiction. DVI managers need to be aware of the authority of people with whom they are dealing. The relative authority of army, police and executive branch of government may not be the same as that to which they are accustomed; it may not be the same in different parts of the country, and it may change during the process. These factors impact on the ability of DVI managers to both gain the necessary approval for actions and to successfully implement those actions. Clear chain of command needs to be established and maintained.

To this end it is proposed that the positions of Fingerprint DVI Coordinator, Odontology DVI Co-ordinator and Molecular Biology DVI Coordinator be established in early days of the response. These personnel would report to and liaise with the DVI Commander. They would have authority for and be responsible for establishing and ensuring adherence to Standard Operating Procedures; for keeping senior management informed; orientation, credentialing and welfare of incoming experts; and relations with local experts. This authority must necessarily include the authority to recommend exclusion of personnel from the operation.

**Credentialing:** Team leaders of the disciplines need to exercise a rigorous vetting, credentialing and orientation process. Personnel may be sent to the operational theater for all kinds of reasons: rank, seniority, academic status rather than field expertise; because some nations feel that the number of their experts involved should be proportional to the number of "their" victims; because they were "good at computers" in a DVI operation where the scale necessitated electronic data storage and management; or in the belief that this could be used as a training exercise.

This process could unavoidably be perceived as confrontational and embarrassing. Credentialing needs to be firm in principle and flexible in execution and can be managed with sensitivity. The approach is based primarily on placing experienced personnel with those less experienced, and mixing the international teams. The jurisdictional issue is relevant here, in that the DVI Co-ordinator for each specialty must have the authority to drive the credentialing.

**Relative Rates of Identification Between Standalone Methods of Identification:** Experience in the response to the Thai Tsunami and indeed the Bali bombings – a more likely scenario in a terrorist attack and where fragmentation was considerable - has shown that the early identifications will be on a dental basis. Fingerprints may well soon contribute significantly to numbers of identifications. Molecular biology, while an invaluable tool, by its nature takes significant time to set up in terms of postmortem and antemortem sampling; choice of laboratories; decisions on statistical boundaries, storage and transport issues and funding.

Consequently, after an assessment of the features particular to any mass casualty incident, staffing and equipment decisions should reflect this relativity, and should support the appropriate specialist teams as their efficacy changes during the evolution of the DVI process.

#### Thai Tsunami, DVI, Cultural Issues