



Tourism Scan

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Asia's tragedy strikes millions- The poor will suffer most

A Comment - Shirley Susan

It was a calm day after the Christmas Celebrations. The fishermen were getting back from the sea, people were on their early morning walks as usual and the children were playing on the beach. The gigantic waves then erupted and suddenly rose to unusual heights. It took everybody and everything by surprise in the world's most populated region. The waves triggered by the biggest earthquake in 40 years sent waves up to 30 feet and devastated fishing villages, washed people out to sea and tore children from their parents' arms, left homes destroyed and completely cut off power and communications. Although big waves have been recorded, no wave has affected so many people in so many countries at the same time.

The earthquake of magnitude of 8.9 as measured by the Geological Survey first struck off the coast of Northern Indonesian Island of Sumatra and swung North with multiple tremors in the Andaman Islands, eastern coast of India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia, Bangladesh and Burma.

Sri Lanka has been the worst hit with over 10,000 dead, along with Indonesia which has reported almost 5,000 killed. Thailand and India follow. But dozens perished even as far as Somalia which is about 4,000 miles from the epicenter. The total number of deaths recorded may rise considerably as rescue workers force their way to isolated communities.

Tourist spots were badly affected in Thailand, Maldives and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The packed holiday resorts in Phuket, Thailand were badly hit. Tourist bungalows were demolished by the waves and hotels were under water. Many tourists have lost their belongings, passports. It is reported that 300 hundred tourists have died while leaving more of them injured and missing. The airport in Bangkok was chaotic as tourists were working out ways to fly back to their respective countries.

The whole of Maldives is a tourist area. Male, the capital of the island of Maldives, just three feet above sea-level was damaged considerably. The International Airport was rendered unusable. The President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom is to shortly declare a national disaster and appeal for international assistance.

Those who were not searching for survivors hastened to bury the dead often in mass graves. Survivors face their greatest danger in the coming days. The threat is from the spread of infection through contamination of drinking water and putrefying bodies left by the receding waters. The costs to the poorest communities cannot be fathomed. Thousands of livelihoods have gone.

Communities were swept away and homes engulfed by waves up to 10m high after the quake created a wall of water that sped across the oceans. The number of dead has climbed well into the thousands in Sri Lanka, India and Indonesia, and thousands are feared to have been killed on the Andaman and Nicobar islands, where reports say several islands have been submerged. In northern Indonesia, nearest to the epicentre of the undersea quake, the vice-president said on Tuesday he feared fatalities in the worst-hit province of Aceh could rise as high as 25,000. Waves also swept the Somali coastline after nightfall on Sunday, where hundreds are feared drowned and thousands made homeless, officials said. In Sri Lanka, about a million are now homeless. The BBC's Roland Buerk in the southern town of Galle says people all along the coast have been digging - for food, water, belongings - and the dead. Searches have also been continuing off southern India for those swept away from beaches or in fishing boats. A national disaster has been announced in the low-lying.

It is increasingly clear that many of the coastal areas that were devastated by the tsunamis were also preferred tourist destinations. The mainstream media is preoccupied by what is happened to the tourists and the overall damages. Loss of lives is seen as a mere statistic, the human social costs are not being upraised and assessed.

For the last several years, the tourism industry has been shaken up by threats of terrorism. Attention to the fact of 'eco-terrorism' has been largely ignored. The current crisis has clearly something to do with the violence inflicted on nature.

What challenge for tourism activists? While millions will pour into the relief phase, the attention of the world will deviate into the next media preoccupation, soon enough when the attention fades, so will the energies. The rich and powerful will stake their claims to compensation for their losses. Their influence and power make certain they receive their dues. The poor and the vulnerable will have been rendered doubly deprived – the first instance, they were in the ranks of the poor and marginalized. The disaster will double – even compound – their misery.

ECOT has launched an appeal to support victims from the tourism sector in the most affected parts of Sri Lanka. It will be first such attempt to crisis of an emergency nature. The frequency of such interruptions in the lives of the tourism workers demands we respond. We hope each of you will be forthcoming with your solidarity and concrete support.



“To act in the midst of human suffering is not merely an obligation; it is an ethical imperative”.