

Team effort behind tsunami relief

Civil Service Newsletter Editorial Board

The Secretary for the Civil Service (SCS), Joseph Wong Wing-ping, has expressed his gratitude to the multi-disciplined support team dispatched to south Asia to help locate missing Hong Kong residents and render assistance to other residents affected by the tsunami on December 26, 2004.

"You have taken up the mission courageously and have worked tirelessly in the most difficult and obnoxious environment. Your dedication and commitment has vividly demonstrated the professionalism of the civil service and earned the high respect of the community we serve," said Mr Wong in a letter to the support team.

At the height of the support operation there were 160 Hong Kong officers from the Immigration Department (ImmD), Police Force, Auxiliary Medical Service (AMS), Civil Aid Service (CAS) and Security Bureau (SB) in various parts of southern Asia rendering assistance. They were supported by the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB), Department of Health (DoH), Social Welfare Department (SWD) and Information Services Department (ISD).

Immediate action plan

Within hours of the tsunami disasters, the HKSAR Government had contacted the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong who advised that all on package tours in and around Phuket, a popular resort in Thailand, were safe. But not

all were on package tours. There were many individual travellers and Hong Kong's official overseas representatives – the Chinese diplomatic and consular missions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the affected countries – were requested to assess the extent of damage and render assistance to the wounded or stranded Hong Kong residents. Despite the suspension of flights to Phuket, the Chinese Consul-General in Sonhkhla, Thailand, sent staff on a six-hour drive by road to locate and assist the stranded Hong Kong residents at the resort.

Task force formed

The HKSAR Government was deeply aggrieved by the incident and the Chief Executive tasked the Chief Secretary for Administration, Donald Tsang, to lead a task force to do everything possible to assist Hong Kong residents so they could return home as soon as possible.

Immediately crisis management came into force. That afternoon (December 26), recalls Deputy Secretary for Security, Michael Wong, "the Immigration Department made preparations to send staff to Phuket, but owing to the suspension of flights, they could not leave until the following morning. Medical staff and a rescue team of the Fire Services Department were also put on standby."

First contingent to Thailand

The following day two immigration officers arrived in Phuket and two other officers were sent to Colombo, Sri Lanka. The Economic Development and Labour Bureau and the Civil Aviation Department (CAD) liaised with airlines to accord the greatest flexibility for the return of Hong Kong residents and put on extra flights should the need arise.

On December 28, two more officers were dispatched to Thailand and two more to Colombo, bringing a total of 12 immigration



Secretary for Security, Ambros Lee, with members of the Auxiliary Medical Service before they depart for tsunami-torn Phuket.

officers in Thailand and Sri Lanka. Mr Tsang held meetings with representatives from four of the affected countries – Thailand, India, the Maldives and Indonesia – to assess the local situation and expressed willingness to offer them aid.

As more and more information came to hand, Hong Kong's efforts were beefed up. The SB with the Police, ImmD, CAS and AMS made preparations for a major reinforcement of personnel to the tsunami stricken areas of Thailand. The Chief Secretary's task force endorsed the deployment of the Hong Kong Support Team, with 19 immigration officers and the first team of medical staff and clinical psychologists departing for Phuket on December 29.

A day later they were reinforced by another 120 officers from SB, the Police, ImmD, ISD, CAS and AMS as well as the second team of medical officers and clinical psychologists.

Command centre

A command centre for the Hong Kong Support Team, coordinated by Principal Assistant Secretary for Security, Linda So, was set up in the Royal Phuket City Hotel for round-the-clock operations with help desks at the Bangkok and Phuket airports and the Thai Government coordination centre. The team also established a presence in six major hospitals on Phuket Island and extended coverage to four other hospitals in more remote areas. At this stage, some 113 Hong

Kong residents reported that they had lost contact with their families in Thailand.

"Within three days of the disaster, we had 160 officers in Bangkok, Phuket and nearby sites," said Ms So. The teams also visited the rescue centres in Krabi, where the injured from Phi Phi Island were sent, while another 40 police officers went to the major resort of Khao Lak, the hardest hit by the tsunami, in search for missing Hong Kong residents.

As at January 17, there remained 34 cases in which callers were able to provide personal details of missing residents: 31 cases in Thailand and three in Indonesia. Some 12 deaths of Hong Kong residents had been reported.

Hong Kong follow-up

Back in Hong Kong HAB and HAD have been offering help to those waiting anxiously for news of missing family members. District Officers contacted informants to the ImmD's hotline and by January 18 they had contacted and offered help to 200 families. HAD and SWD had also set up a help desk at Hong Kong International Airport as a referral service for Hong Kong residents returning from the tsunami stricken areas. SWD also set up a special hotline manned by clinical psychologists and by

January 12, when it ceased operations, had received 118 calls. The Education and Manpower Bureau had also issued a circular to schools requesting them to report on the number of staff or pupils who might be absent due to the tsunami.

Deep pockets

Meanwhile, Hong Kong people joined the world raising funds for the stricken countries. The Hong Kong Government made an immediate contribution of \$30 million; the HAD organised a fund raising concert at the Hong Kong

Stadium, and SCS appealed to all civil servants to give generously.

By January 5, just 10 days after the disaster, Hong Kong had privately raised \$400 million, representing \$55 for every man, woman and child, leading the world on donations on a per capita basis. And more was to come. Radio Television Hong Kong's Operation Santa Claus 2004 was extended to raise funds for relief efforts. And at its close on January 18, it had raised an additional \$16.85 million for 12 beneficiaries in Hong Kong (\$7.27 million) and UNICEF (\$9.58 million).



Led by the Chief Executive, senior Government officials join hands with legislators and other community leaders in a major fund raising campaign for the tsunami-torn south Asian countries and victims.

Equality in the civil service

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SITTING atop the Legislative Council building in Central is a statue of the blindfolded Lady of Justice, a remnant of the days when the building was Hong Kong's Supreme Court. With a sword in one hand and a set of scales in the other, she represents fairness. The scales are balanced, symbolising equality.



And so it is in Hong Kong where the laws have been designed to ensure that everyone is treated on an equal footing, regardless of sex, creed, nationality or physical and mental ability.

The broad perception of equality conjures up the Battle of the Sexes; her against him (or should it be him against her!) to secure an equal footing on the promotion ladder. Indeed, male domination of the upper levels of the workforce was the case until perhaps the past couple of decades. The Government was no exception, but that was to change.

The move for women's rights

Former Chief Secretary for the Administration, Anson Chan Fang On-sang joined the civil service in 1962 when male and female civil servants did not receive equal remuneration. In the early 1970s, when she was a Senior Administrative Officer she helped establish the Association of Female Senior Government Officers to fight for better rights