

Joint findings on lessons to be learned from the handling of the response to the Indian Ocean tsunami

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Preface

This work was produced by a small NAO/FCO team comprising a professional NAO examiner and an experienced FCO career diplomat. Fieldwork was undertaken in the UK and during visits to Thailand and Sri Lanka. Interviews were undertaken with key participants in the affected region and in the UK across the various public and voluntary agencies involved. The team's brief was to focus on what the Department could learn to improve its preparedness and capability for future crises. But since the Department worked in co-operation with many other agencies the team considered, and has reported on, how these links can be made more effective.

This work looks at the lessons learned from the perspective of service deliverers. The NAO has commissioned separate work from the Zito Trust to gather views from those victims and their families who needed these services. This work is expected to result in a report in 2006.

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SUMMARY

1. An earthquake occurred off the coast of Indonesia on 26 December 2004 measuring 9.3 on the Richter scale. The earthquake triggered a tsunami (a large sea wave) that struck the coasts of thirteen countries, causing great devastation and loss of life. At the time of writing, the latest estimate is that 300,000 people died, including over three thousand foreign nationals staying in the area. Many thousands more foreign nationals were either injured or displaced. The events represented an unprecedented challenge for the consular services of many countries, including the United Kingdom's.
2. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has progressively enhanced its capability to deal with major crises over recent years, in the aftermath of successive emergencies such as "9/11", the Bali bombings and smaller scale events such as major transport accidents. The need to subject arrangements to constant challenge continues to be emphasised by events since the tsunami, such as Hurricane Katrina in the USA. Furthermore, distressed Britons cannot receive the best possible service unless the national response, both overseas and in the UK, is well co-ordinated between government departments and agencies, the police and health authorities and the voluntary sector.
3. Fundamentally, success in delivering consular support is determined by getting the right, suitably experienced people with the right skills, equipped with the right systems and support, into the right places, at the right time. In the chaos of the tsunami this was very exacting, notwithstanding strenuous and dedicated work by many public servants. The government has acknowledged that in the case of the tsunami not all these elements were always achieved, and that on occasions mistakes were made. The important point is to learn the lessons and improve. We are aware of many changes that the FCO has made without waiting for the finalisation of this report, and we have not sought to duplicate these here.

4. The key lessons from this report fall into four main groups.
 - How best to prepare for handling potentially huge numbers of calls from a public desperate for information, and to improve the recording of information about casualties so that data is captured once, with consistency and held in the same place.
 - Broadening the mix of skills deployed to the affected areas, and extending the FCO pool of experienced consular staff from which rapid response teams are drawn, not least to help the staffing of protracted crises and to raise standards of expertise.
 - Having sufficient plans and agreements in place before any crisis to clarify the respective roles and responsibilities of the various agencies, and how these are to be funded. The Cabinet Office and HM Treasury have an important role here.
 - Working with the UK Police and international Agencies to boost the UK's capability to support Disaster Victim Identification (DVI).
5. Finally, this report complements, and has fed into, the National Audit Office's report on FCO consular services. The NAO report has drawn on this report's evidence on the handling of the tsunami to inform its wider conclusions on the Department's arrangements for consular crises. Both reports look at the lessons learned mainly from the perspective of service deliverers. So next year, following careful preparation, the Zito Trust, working to the NAO, will gather views from those victims and their families who required assistance. The extent of review in this area reflects the vital importance of the service.

Part 1: The scale of the tsunami disaster was unprecedented

The Boxing Day 2004 earthquake set off a tsunami that caused great devastation and loss of life

- 1.1 An earthquake occurred on 26 December 2004 measuring 9.3 on the Richter scale, off the coast of north-west Sumatra in Indonesia. The earthquake triggered a tsunami (a large sea wave) that struck the coasts of thirteen countries, causing great devastation and loss of life. At the time of writing (September 2005), the latest estimate is that 300,000 people died, principally in Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Due to the holiday season, more Britons than usual were travelling overseas, and very few public servants were working in Whitehall on that day.

The scale of the tsunami relative to other major crises affecting British Citizens

Event	Date	Number of Britons believed to have died	Total number believed to have died	Number of countries afflicted
“9/11” attacks	September 2001	67	2,992	1
Bali Bombings	October 2002	28	202	1
Indian Ocean tsunami	December 2004	141	c.300,000	13

The Foreign & Commonwealth Office offers consular assistance to British nationals in difficulty or distress overseas

- 1.2 The Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) has rights under the international Vienna Convention on Consular Relations to assist British nationals in difficulty or distress overseas. It is tasked by the government of the day, and has until now

only had internal guidelines setting out its obligations to nationals caught up in tsunami-type situations. The FCO intends to publish these early in 2006.

Article 5 of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations of 1963 provides for “helping and assisting nationals, both individuals and bodies corporate, of the sending State.”

The FCO has improved its crisis management capability in recent years

- 1.3 The FCO has improved its crisis management capability following previous events. After the Bali bombing in October 2002 the FCO:
 - established a crisis response centre as an initial point of contact; and
 - introduced Rapid Deployment Teams (RDTs). These are groups of trained officers with relevant skills, who are on standby and available to travel anywhere in the world at short notice in the event of a crisis.
- 1.4 In November 2003, four members of the British Consulate in Istanbul died in a terrorist attack. Following this event, the FCO issued revised emergency planning guidance, requiring Posts to exercise and test their planning.
- 1.5 It is thought that approximately 10,000 British nationals were in the affected region when the tsunami struck. As at the end of September 2005 there were 140 confirmed British dead and one highly likely to have died, a total of 141. Three of these were in the Maldives, 17 in Sri Lanka and 121, including the one unconfirmed, in Thailand.

Part 2: The FCO responded effectively to the crisis, but there is a need for increased preparedness to deal with future events

The FCO's immediate response to the crisis was swift

- 2.1 As soon as news of the tsunami broke, FCO staff in London and in the affected regions responded immediately. FCO officers arrived in all the affected regions at the earliest possible moments, while the response in London was equally swift.

London

- 2.2 At 8.30am on 26 December, the FCO opened an emergency telephone number for people concerned about friends and relatives. The number was advertised widely on television and radio, in newspapers and on the FCO's website. Operating initially from the FCO's London headquarters, it soon became apparent that the FCO's existing call handling facilities were unable to cope with the volume of calls that were being received. In accordance with a draft service level agreement between the FCO and the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), the latter took over call handling, at its casualty bureau in Hendon, at 3.00pm on the same day.
- 2.3 The Metropolitan Police's call handling capability was also insufficient to deal with the volume of calls received. At the height of the crisis, calls were being received at a rate of 11,000 per hour, or three per second. Many concerned British citizens were unable to get through on the emergency line. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that some callers used the number to make non-urgent enquiries such as those related to travel advice, although the FCO had made it clear in their publicity that the number was only for people concerned about friends and relatives. We **recommend** that the FCO work with partners to consider ways of better sifting individuals making non-urgent calls to emergency numbers, including the use of menu-driven telephone software. The FCO and the police are considering technical solutions to this issue.
- 2.4 Initially, 36 trained MPS staff were engaged in taking calls. Although further operators were quickly deployed this was hampered by the fact that the disaster had occurred during a national holiday. In order to meet the urgent need to

answer as many calls as possible, the Police decided to deploy operators some of whom had little or no experience in this type of call handling, and had received little training. As a result, the initial information taken by some operators was insufficient to enable the MPS to carry out a proper missing person enquiry. In these circumstances, MPS or FCO staff had to contact the person making the report again. There were inaccuracies in people's names and addresses, understandable given the massive volumes, but it still caused difficulties. The key issues are how details are recorded and the importance of ensuring that each logged call has a unique reference number to speed up cross-checking. Following these events the Police Service commissioned a review of the capabilities of the Casualty Bureau which is led by an Assistant Chief Constable from the West Midlands force, and at the time of writing is ongoing.

- 2.5 The FCO and the police were in the process of negotiating a service level agreement over call handling at the time of the tsunami. It is doubtful whether the MPS's call centre would have been able to cope with the volume of calls any more easily had the agreement been in place. Nevertheless, we **recommend** that the FCO and the police finalise the agreement. We understand that work to progress this is ongoing.
- 2.6 The police are actively developing new software known as Casweb, (see paragraph 3.13). The software enables police forces to co-ordinate their efforts in responding to major incidents, for example by routing calls to an emergency telephone number on to the police call centre best able to take them. The software was used for the first time to manage the response to the Boscastle flood in August 2004. It was not used in the response to the tsunami because it had not been satisfactorily tested in the Metropolitan Police area. The police advise us that it is now operational and was well tested during the events of 7 July 2005 in London.
- 2.7 The MPS and FCO did not seek to use the call handling resources of the voluntary or private sectors during the crisis. To have done so would have enabled callers to get through more easily to the emergency number, but might have had a further

negative impact on the quality of the information recorded by less experienced call handlers. The existing travel advice service provided through the MM Group call centre continued to operate through the crisis. We **recommend** that the FCO consider the merits of establishing service level agreements with other providers of call handling services, such as the private sector or the British Red Cross, to provide further reserve capacity in the event of similar extreme circumstances. Providers less experienced in the field of disaster management may still have a useful contribution to make in handling less sensitive calls, or in lodging the initial, basic details of serious calls.

- 2.8 Beyond the first 48 hours of the crisis, the FCO in London put into place longer term arrangements which are still running; including those for direct contact with families of victims in the UK; management of the assistance package available for distressed citizens; media and parliamentary work; engagement with non-government organisations and the police, and liaison with the European Union and other partners.
- 2.9 The FCO also had to handle public controversy around aspects of its own response, some of this was intrinsically complex, and therefore labour-intensive.
- 2.10 First, there was intense media interest in casualty numbers. It was initially impossible to establish these with confidence; Some 22,000 Britons were initially reported missing and any or all could theoretically have been dead. The FCO decided not to release such a high figure and so risk generating unnecessary alarm. It took a more cautious approach, deferring an announcement until 3 January when it disclosed that 199 Britons were ‘highly likely’ to have died. This was controversial at the time but consistent with the authoritative casualty figures later established; some 141 people are now believed to have died. The Swedish government, by contrast, quickly announced that 2,300 Swedes were missing and declared a national day of mourning; and it was criticised when the number of dead turned out to be very much lower.

- 2.11 A further lesson learned in this area related to the slight difference in British casualty numbers between the FCO and the Police. This was because unlike the Police's figures, the FCO's included those deaths it had certified overseas. In future crises there needs to be only one set of figures, produced from an agreed standard methodology.
- 2.12 Second, there was trenchant public criticism of the FCO's work from several families, including criticism around some developments beyond its power to control. Between 1 and 9 January, for example, the cases of ten families generated very negative media coverage of the FCO in some 15 stories. The handling of legitimate grievances and of media coverage were an additional call on FCO resources. In addition it fell to the FCO, as the department responsible for certifying deaths overseas, to press for reconsideration of pre-existing practice on death certification, (paragraph 3.2 below); a change which was implemented very quickly. Public pressure to relax the rule that a person should be missing for seven years before being declared dead grew rapidly in the days following the disaster, again made publicly controversial by media coverage.

Thailand

- 2.13 The British Embassy in Bangkok opened an incident centre on 26 December, which was staffed by a combination of available officers, their spouses and other family members and volunteers. The incident centre included a call centre with eight dedicated lines, which handled large numbers of enquiries from the public. At the peak on 27 December, the Embassy received 10,608 calls, of which 6,452 (61 percent) were answered. A team of staff and volunteers visited the large numbers of British nationals in Bangkok hospitals, while others met distressed British nationals arriving from the coast and returning through Bangkok airport, in many cases providing food, clothing and emergency loans. Staff at the centre also issued emergency passports and other documents, arranged flights back to the UK, and co-ordinated with London, other Posts and the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

- 2.14 Some other European countries (e.g. Germany and France) immediately despatched medical and para-medical personnel to Thailand. Until 1 January 2005, the only trained medical personnel with the British team in the field were one doctor, one nurse and one retired counsellor, all local volunteers. No Rapid Deployment Team was sent from London to Thailand in the initial stage, for reasons explained in paragraph 2.27 below. The first British Red Cross contingent was not deployed until 3 January (paragraph 3.16 below). As a consequence, the team deployed in the field was extremely hard pressed to cover 200 miles of affected coastline.
- 2.15 The British Ambassador to Thailand travelled from Bangkok to Phuket on 26 December with a team of Embassy staff in three four wheel-drive vehicles. A small team travelled in by air once Phuket airport had re-opened. An emergency office in Phuket was opened at 0100 on 27 December in rooms provided by the British Consular Correspondent. The team was joined over the next few days by more staff from Bangkok, volunteers from the British community and from Posts in the region which had offered help. The Phuket-based team deployed swiftly and flexibly and faced the immediate pressures of dealing with distressed or injured survivors and encountering large numbers of bodies. But there were some gaps; some British nationals in the badly affected resort of Khao Lak, for example have criticised the fact that FCO staff did not arrive there in strength to assist them until 29 December.
- 2.16 The Embassy team based itself in Phuket, which was the Thai Government's emergency response centre and to where the authorities were evacuating survivors and casualties from outlying regions, and from there on to Bangkok. In the crucial first 48 hours it took time to establish the full geographic extent of the devastation and the locations of the large numbers of British people affected. It eventually transpired that about half the British casualties in Thailand were in the Phang Nga area. This had consequences for the extent of immediate consular support that was provided in that area. One Embassy Land Rover had been detached from the original convoy en route to Phuket, to assess the scale of the

damage in the provinces of Krabi and Phang Nga (which includes Khao Lak). Some roads in Phang Nga were impassable and this team had to negotiate access to other roads closed by the authorities. This three person team was in Phang Nga from 27 December, and organised and accompanied one coach on 28 December which passed through the province, including stops along the coastline around Khao Lak, carrying survivors to Phuket. The Embassy team on Phuket expanded its operations to other areas as more volunteers arrived. Fresh teams were deployed to Krabi and Phang Nga from 29 December, though by that time many Britons had been evacuated.

- 2.17 Communications became increasingly difficult in Bangkok and in the affected area. In the tsunami affected area, many land lines were down and the mobile phone network swiftly became overloaded. As a knock-on effect of the difficulties with the call centres in London, (paragraphs 2.2-2.6), the Embassy in Bangkok, operating with reduced staff because of the deployment to Phuket, was inundated with calls from the UK, in addition to distress calls and e-mails from the affected area in Thailand. The 6,452 calls answered by the Embassy on 27 December had to be logged, sifted and actioned. Despite overnight working by teams of staff and family members, this was serious pressure of work, and some Embassy e-mail addresses were not checked in the first 24 hours. Some British nationals have criticised the lack of response to calls for assistance. A request for assistance from the Khao Lak area was not seen by the team in Phuket until 29 December, when action was immediately but belatedly taken. There is clearly a need for FCO emergency plans to consider how to access sufficient resources to manage exceptionally large call numbers during major crises.
- 2.18 In Thailand and also in Sri Lanka (see below), the contribution of the volunteers was crucial to the immediate response. FCO staff in both countries told us that without the efforts of the volunteers the British response would have been seriously compromised. In Sri Lanka the volunteers included doctors who set up first aid posts to treat injured British nationals. There were, however, no networks in place for matching the skills of volunteers with the tasks available. Managing

the volunteers therefore created a significant challenge for the FCO staff in the affected countries.

Sri Lanka

- 2.19 The British High Commission in Colombo also opened an incident centre at midday on 26 December, which remained open 24 hours a day until 7 January. The centre was staffed by a combination of High Commission officers and British volunteers, who gave consular assistance to British nationals arriving in Colombo from the coast. In addition, the Sri Lankan authorities set up an emergency shelter at a conference centre in Colombo. The High Commission operated a help desk at the conference centre 24 hours a day from 29 to 31 December, giving consular assistance to British nationals there.
- 2.20 The High Commission sent a team of experienced consular officers to the south-western resort of Galle by helicopter on 27 December. They set up an office in a local hotel and began the work of searching for foreign – not just British – nationals and evacuating them from the area. Staff at other countries' Missions told us that the British High Commission had the largest and most visible consular presence of any overseas country in Galle in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami.
- 2.21 The FCO mobilised a Rapid Deployment Team from London on 26 December, which arrived on the 27 December and was reinforced by a further four officers on 29 December. The team provided two mobile consular teams for the southern and eastern coasts of the island. It arranged the evacuation of British and other foreign nationals from Aragum Bay on the east coast, and the Unawatuna area on the south coast, to Colombo between 26 and 29 December.
- 2.22 At Colombo Airport, as in Thailand, the High Commission's experienced airline liaison officer helped British nationals to board flights home. Many had no travel documents, but the liaison officer worked with the airport and airlines to ensure their co-operation. By 30 December, all British nationals who wished to leave the

tsunami-affected areas had done so. By 31 December, all Britons who wanted to return home had left Sri Lanka.

Maldives

- 2.23 There is no British consular presence on the Maldives (other than an honorary consul, who was on holiday at the time of the tsunami). There were, however, many British nationals on the islands on 26 December. The British High Commission in Colombo therefore sent an experienced officer to the islands on 27 December, who was joined the following day by a Military Intelligence Liaison Officer from the UK Ministry of Defence. Together they located Britons with the help of local tour company representatives, visited those in hospital and helped to evacuate them from the islands. By 30 December, all British nationals who wished to leave the Maldives had departed.

Indonesia and other countries

- 2.24 FCO travel advice had already warned against travelling to the Banda Aceh region of Indonesia, which was worst hit by the tsunami. Furthermore, the local authorities actively discouraged visits to the region by foreign nationals. Nevertheless, the British Embassy established that resident and visiting Westerners were present in small numbers. Embassy staff then visited the region and made extensive enquiries to establish that there were no British casualties. For several days after the disaster commercial flights to Banda Aceh were either cancelled or substantially delayed due to incoming aid flights. Embassy staff travelled to the region on 30 December on an Australian military aircraft and ascertained that there were no British casualties.
- 2.25 Posts in India, Malaysia and Burma were able to assure themselves that no British nationals had been involved without sending staff to the affected areas.

The early decision to send a Rapid Deployment Team to Sri Lanka had repercussions in Thailand

- 2.26 A Rapid Deployment Team (see paragraph 1.3 above) is a group of FCO officers with relevant skills, who are on standby in London and available to travel

anywhere in the world at short notice in the event of a crisis. FCO staff volunteer to become members of a team and then receive specialist training in crisis management, including helping the bereaved, liaison with the police, coroners and pathologists, and the use of satellite telephones and global navigation systems.

The FCO expect between ten and twelve RDT officers to be on standby in London at all times. One team was on stand-by on Boxing Day.

2.27 As stated above (paragraph 2.21), the FCO sent this RDT to Sri Lanka on 26 December. There were a number of reasons for the decision to deploy the RDT to Sri Lanka rather than Thailand:

- initial reports suggested that Sri Lanka and the Maldives were likely to be more badly affected than Thailand. The Maldives are also covered by the High Commission in Colombo;
- other FCO staff trained in crisis management were already on standby in South and South East Asia, and were able to travel more quickly to Bangkok;
- the greater travelling time from London to Bangkok than from London to Colombo

The decision to deploy the RDT to Sri Lanka did, however, mean that it was not possible to deploy a complete RDT to Thailand. Reinforcements from London only arrived on 8 and 9 January. Although officers from neighbouring Posts gave a great deal of valuable support, the response in Thailand lacked trained staff with certain key skills and experience. Furthermore, the initial reports that Sri Lanka and the Maldives had been affected more seriously than Thailand turned out to be incorrect. Conditions on the ground in Thailand were generally better than they were in Sri Lanka, where staff in Colombo had to contend with broken bridges and blocked roads. Embassy staff in Thailand were able to get to some of the affected areas within ten hours, except in Phang Nga province where some roads were impassable and others closed, and on offshore Islands such as Phi Phi where there were also large numbers of British casualties.

Rapid Deployment requires deploying the right skills, to perform the right roles, as quickly as possible

- 2.28 Some staff in Sri Lanka told us that they had not been made aware of the role and responsibilities of the RDT. They had been unclear whether the remit of the RDT was to command and control or to assist and advise, in the response to the crisis. We were also told that the RDT had worked very much on its own, and had not sought the assistance of staff with local knowledge of the region. This response echoes reactions to the arrival of RDTs in earlier crises, even though guidance already existed stating that RDT's are there to support local teams, and not to "take over". Clearly this message needs to be reinforced and reiterated.
- 2.29 The Sri Lankan RDT included FCO officers with a wide range of skills and knowledge. Their experiences demonstrate, however, that there is a need to add other specialisms to the mix if RDTs are to operate at full capability. We **recommend** that the FCO consider including, as a minimum, a police officer and a representative of the Red Cross in future RDTs, and note that International SOS and British Red Cross Society staff have now begun to deploy with RDTs. There are other possibilities worth considering: A UK coroner could be a valuable addition to large scale incidents, as could a military medic after a terrorist attack - if at the scene quickly enough - to assist with triage decisions. The Police have expressed interest in providing a fuller role in Rapid Deployment teams and we **recommend** that this is discussed between FCO, Association of Chief Police Officers and the Metropolitan Police.
- 2.30 Until the Tsunami, all the FCO's trained RDT volunteers were based in London. Although the RDT was quickly mobilised to Sri Lanka, the response would have been quicker still if there had been RDT volunteers based in the region. We **recommend** that the FCO consider establishing a global network of regional RDT volunteers, who would be based at Posts and able to respond quickly to crises in their part of the world. We note that the FCO deployed a regional RDT based in

Hong Kong to Bali in late 2005, after our fieldwork, and plans to establish an RDT in the USA next year.

FCO staff would benefit from more training in crisis response and consular work

2.31 FCO staff in the region and in London coped tremendously well under severe pressure. They worked extremely long hours and made great personal sacrifices in order to provide the professional and humanitarian response that British nationals expected. However, the traumatic circumstances and the need to make immediate vital decisions, often based on little or confused information, proved very testing. Mistakes were made and unintended insensitivity shown in certain cases. Officials could have benefited from more training to deal with this kind of emergency. We **recommend** that consular staff should undergo regular training in crisis response, reinforced by annual exercises. We recommend that any regional RDTs that might be set up (paragraph 2.28) could also carry out in-country training of embassy staff and play a role in exercising emergency plans. All staff going overseas, including officials not normally engaged in consular work, would benefit from basic training in dealing with the injured, the bereaved, working to best effect with other agencies such as the Police, and issues around sudden death.

Emergency plans were little used during the crisis

- 2.32 All Posts are expected to have emergency plans. These are documents setting out the actions that a Post should take, and the procedures that it should introduce, in the event of an emergency. Prior to July 2004, Posts had separate consular emergency plans, business continuity plans and terrorism plans. In July 2004 the FCO introduced a requirement for Posts to incorporate these separate plans into an overall emergency plan. Since the tsunami, further progress has been made in this and by June 2005, 168 Posts had done so.
- 2.33 At the time of the crisis, both Colombo and Bangkok had recently introduced new-style consular emergency plans, which in the case of Bangkok had been

tested through desk exercises. The plans were implemented for the first time during the tsunami. We found, however, that despite this staff did not make great use of them, finding them to be overlong and of limited relevance to the emergency. There is a need for more concise (one-page or two-page) plan summaries to complement the overall plans, giving individuals the key action points to be followed and contacts to be made. We **recommend** that the FCO introduce such plan summaries, initially at those Posts where the risk of emergencies is felt to be greatest, and ensure that these are tested to ensure that they add value in practice. We understand that work is already taking place on more concise plan summaries.

Disaster Victim Identification

- 2.34 At the end of June, six months after the tsunami, 17 FCO staff were still working full-time on tsunami-related issues, mainly in London, Bangkok and Phuket. Their principal tasks were to support the continuing international Disaster Victim Identification process in Thailand to maximise the chances of the early identification of the remaining missing Britons, to liaise with the police on this and related missing persons enquiries and to help relatives travelling to the area under the FCO's assistance package.
- 2.35 Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) is the internationally recognised process by which unidentified bodies are matched with lists of missing persons. In the case of the tsunami, some bodies have been identified by visual means, but most have been and are being identified through the DVI process. There are three means by which a body may be identified through the DVI process – fingerprints, dental records and DNA matching.
- 2.36 DVI work has taken place in all affected countries. In Sri Lanka, for example, the direct involvement of the FCO ended in May with the cremation of the last missing Briton to be identified. The majority of the international DVI effort, however, is based in Thailand. Police officers and other specialists from the UK and around 30 other countries are engaged in gathering 'post-mortem'

identification data at the Thai mortuary sites. At the same time, officers around the world are gathering comparable ‘ante-mortem’ identification data on missing persons.

- 2.37 The evidence is sent to the Thai Tsunami Victim Identification Information Management Centre (TTVI-IMC) in Phuket, which attempts to match the two sets of data. Once the Centre has made a definite match, the Thai authorities are responsible for issuing the death certificate and releasing the body for repatriation to the home country. By August 2005 there were still over 1,600 unidentified bodies of tsunami victims held in Thai mortuaries, of which well over three-quarters are likely to be of Thai or Burmese nationals.
- 2.38 In the first months of the identification process, the majority of positive identifications were made through the successful matching of fingerprints or dental records. The number of matches made by these methods is progressively declining, however, and the TTVI-IMC will be increasingly reliant on DNA matching as the primary method of making positive identifications.
- 2.39 DNA matching is a long and painstaking process. A senior Thai official estimated in April 2005 that it might take two to five years for all the remaining bodies held in Thailand to be identified. One of the problems is that genetic data in tissue samples has been damaged by faster than expected decay.
- 2.40 We recognise that the FCO must respect the independence of the international DVI process, and the sovereignty of the Thai government in issuing death certificates and repatriating bodies. We **recommend**, however, that the FCO agree with the relevant other UK agencies to create a national DVI capability that can be deployed quickly overseas when required to support prompt identification and repatriation of remains, possibly as a follow-up component of rapid deployment teams. The Police have informed us that a feasibility study is under way with a view to providing a capability that would meet the needs of crises in the UK as well as overseas. We also **recommend** that the FCO work with appropriate international agencies, such as Interpol, to reinforce the lessons

learned from this DVI experience. Such reinforcement might include the establishment of protocols relating to staffing and funding of the DVI process, and undertakings by states to remain actively involved in the process.

Evacuation flights

- 2.41 Government-chartered flights to bring home survivors may bring both practical and morale benefits. They can help ensure that survivors suffer the minimum of trauma; that the injured get proper medical care quickly; and that Post and other staff on the ground can focus on other priority tasks. They can also send a message to both families and the wider public about the government's determination to act decisively and generously on its citizens' behalf. The usefulness of an initial flight, at least, can be enhanced by taking out a Rapid Deployment Team and others, before bringing back survivors.
- 2.42 The FCO was not initially convinced that such flights to the tsunami-affected regions were cost-effective, bearing in mind that there was surplus capacity on commercial flights and some scope for the use of flights laid on by EU partners. Britain sent out only one chartered flight, to Bangkok in Thailand, which returned more than half empty on 1 January. (Sweden, by contrast, sent out twenty flights, Germany eleven, and France ten. British nationals returned to Europe in small numbers on some of these flights, but many of those were not filled either.) By this date, most of those who were able to leave had flown out on scheduled flights, flights chartered by tour operators, insurers and flights laid on by other countries. Staff in Bangkok told us that they had been given insufficient notice of the flight's arrival to enable them to inform many remaining British nationals of its existence. It also required Britons to have travelled from the coastal region to the Capital. Timely and accurate information on what suitable flights are available – in order to get people out quickly and safely is the key priority – the nationality of the carrier is arguably less so, providing the UK government's overall approach to evacuation is explained clearly to the families by the UK officials at the time.

2.43 Notwithstanding the cost effectiveness issues noted above, a series of government evacuation flights in the first 72 hours of the crisis would, at least, have eased the pressures of handling distressed evacuees who were obliged to stay overnight or longer in Bangkok and Colombo. We therefore **recommend** that the FCO reconsider the advantages and disadvantages, giving due weight to public expectations, and establish criteria for chartering which would permit quicker decision-making in future. We also **recommend** that the FCO discuss with EU partners (see below) possible arrangements for more effective sharing of capacity in future events.

There was effective co-operation between the FCO and other countries

- 2.44 Despite the scale of the crisis, consular co-ordination between EU member states was effective. There were daily conference calls between EU crisis managers, and chartered aircraft were shared between nations. Several British nationals, for example, returned home on German aircraft.
- 2.45 In Indonesia, the British Embassy made early contact with the Australian Embassy. As a result, British officials travelled to the badly affected region of Banda Aceh on an Australian aircraft, and were able to report back on the situation there.
- 2.46 The FCO are planning to support the holding of regular EU-wide meetings to share contingency planning and best practice, including live exercises. The first of these took place in London in April 2005.

Part 3: The FCO worked in partnership with a range of public, private and voluntary bodies in responding to the crisis

Other government departments had, and continue to have, significant roles in responding to the needs of tsunami victims

- 3.1 In any crisis situation, government departments need to work together to provide a joined-up response to meet the needs of citizens. Because the tsunami crisis took place overseas, the FCO naturally became the lead department in responding to the crisis. Until the Department for Culture, Media and Sport took on lead department responsibilities within the UK in March (para.3.7 below), the FCO remained the principal point of contact within government for victims and their families on their return. As such, it handled numerous requests for guidance and help, notably on health issues, which it was not qualified or formally tasked to provide. The FCO acted to some extent as the victims' advocate in Whitehall, and as lead department for parliamentary letters and questions on, and media interest in, non-consular aspects of the victims' situations. Other government departments, however, had, and continue to have, significant roles.

There was no high level strategy for government departments in responding to the crisis

- 3.2 The Cabinet Office was responsible for co-ordinating the liaison between the FCO and other government departments, where a joined-up response was necessary. It provided a forum, for example, through which the issue of declaring a victim legally dead where there was no formal identification, was resolved. In doing so it co-ordinated the responses of the Departments for Health, Work and Pensions, Constitutional Affairs, the Inland Revenue and Home Office as well as the FCO. But the Cabinet Office has no executive capacity, and could not enter into contact with victims or their families.
- 3.3 Some FCO officers told us that co-ordination between it and other government departments was not as good as it might have been. Although the FCO was in regular contact with other departments throughout the crisis, this contact was often unplanned and informal. In the midst of the crisis there was, unsurprisingly,

limited time for government-wide thinking on the strategic responsibilities of departments. Although there were regular joint meetings of departments and agencies throughout January, these tended to focus on resolving immediate issues such as support for British nationals returning home and on media management.

- 3.4 Even before the London bombings of July 2005 the Cabinet Office has been reviewing the mechanisms in place for co-ordinating government handling of major civil emergencies in the UK. We **recommend** that emergencies abroad involving large numbers of British nationals, particularly natural disasters, are handled as far as possible through the same mechanisms, to ensure that natural and other non-terrorist disasters overseas benefit from a consistent approach and level of commitment as would terrorist incidents.

Ministry of Defence

- 3.5 The Ministry of Defence (MoD) responded to the tsunami crisis by sending Military Intelligence Liaison Officers to the Maldives (see paragraph 2.20) and to Indonesia. These officers had valuable experience in satellite communications and disaster management.
- 3.6 The MoD did not assist in evacuating British nationals from the affected region, principally because, under well established procedures for military evacuations, the armed forces only intervene in situations where there is armed conflict or a perceived threat of it. The Defence sector, however, possesses logistical skills, capabilities and experience that the FCO by its own admission does not, and that might have been valuable in responding to the tsunami crisis. We **recommend** that the FCO enter into discussions with the MoD on how these skills might be exploited in future incidents, and note that these are under way.

Department of Culture, Media and Sport

- 3.7 The FCO funded the initial work by the British Red Cross to set up the Tsunami Support Network for UK nationals who were affected. But since March 2005, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has been responsible for co-

ordinating support within the UK for tsunami victims and their families. DCMS's role is:

- to assess victims' needs;
- to ensure that a family support network is put in place;
- to ensure that survivors and bereaved can access mainstream services and appropriate benefits easily;
- to provide a single point of contact for victims and families within government;
- to organise a national memorial service, held at St Paul's in May 2005; and
- to identify and support those victims who require additional support.

British tour operators assisted many British nationals to return home

- 3.8 Of the 10,000 British tourists in the region, around 6,000 were on package holidays and the remaining 4,000 were independent travellers. Many of the package holidaymakers returned home on flights chartered by their tour operators. British tour operators are obliged to provide airlifts home for their customers in emergency situations, under a duty of care clause in the Package Travel Regulations (1992).
- 3.9 The two main umbrella organisations of the British travel industry are the Federation of Tour Operators (FTO) and the Association of British Travel Agents. Staff from both bodies reported that they had frequent contact and good working relations with the FCO throughout the crisis. The FTO told us that the FCO's response to the tsunami was significantly more efficient and effective than the responses to the 9/11 and Bali crises had been, particularly in the updating of travel advice.
- 3.10 We received differing reports of the levels of co-operation locally based tour company representatives gave to FCO consular staff. Staff in Sri Lanka told us that they had not received the expected assistance from tour representatives, who

did not provide them with the lists of guests they had requested. In the Maldives, however, tour operators were a valuable source of information for FCO staff. The FCO now plans to involve representatives from the FTO in its consular training. We welcome this development, and further **recommend** that Posts should include co-operation with local tour operators in their emergency plans.

The FCO have worked in close partnership with the police throughout the crisis

- 3.11 The work of the police has been central to the British response to the crisis. The role of the police has been fourfold:
- the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) handled the majority of calls made to the FCO's emergency telephone number (see paragraphs 2.2-2.7 above) and entered the details of missing persons onto their HOLMES database;
 - the police had a presence at British airports, helping to receive those returning home from the region;
 - the police have provided, and continue to provide, Family Liaison Officers who gather forensic evidence to support identification and also provide general support to the bereaved; and
 - police forces from around the UK are playing an important role in the international Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) process in Thailand and Sri Lanka, (paragraphs 2.32-2.38).
- 3.12 The FCO has worked closely in partnership with the police throughout the crisis, and both the FCO and police told us that co-operation between them worked very well, particularly at the level of strategic leadership. Insofar as there were any problems, they were short-lived and stemmed not from any fundamental dispute over roles and responsibilities but from the lack of a framework by which the relationship could be defined. Such a framework would have assisted the speed and effectiveness of the response in the first week of the crisis. We therefore **recommend** that the FCO should seek to enter into a framework agreement with the police nationwide, to cover the major responsibilities of the parties in an

overseas crisis. Such an agreement would complement and extend the draft service level agreement between the FCO and MPS on call handling (see paragraph 2.5 above).

- 3.13 One important area in which the Department and the Police need to reach a better understanding is in casualty recording. The Police system designed for this purpose is “Casweb” (see paragraph 2.6), a module now being implemented in most police forces which links into HOLMES2, the police national computer used for major criminal enquiries. The FCO is concerned that FCO use of “Casweb” as a specialised piece of software would carry a serious and continuing training burden, particularly at Posts overseas, the vast majority of which would never have to use the system in a real emergency. Its preferred solution is to continue to use its own consular casework systems but to link these into “Casweb” through an automated interface. However this would require the agreement of the Police Information Technology Organisation, and work to prove the technical solution. Another area which requires development is the harmonisation of definitions between both organisations for casualty recording, to ensure consistency, for example, the burden of evidence that is required before a person is counted as “probably deceased”. There were periods during the tsunami when each organisation produced slightly different casualty figures as a result. **We recommend** that both areas are addressed as a matter of urgency.
- 3.14 FCO officials in the region told us of a small number of misunderstandings between themselves and the police that might have been avoided if a framework agreement between the parties had been in place. British Embassy staff in Indonesia, for example, reported that they were unaware of the presence of two British police officers in Jakarta until they had left. Through later telephone contact it was established that these officers had a shortlist from their own constabulary of British nationals whom they believed to be missing in Indonesia. Though this was not consistent with the main national list held by the Hendon centre, it did help to resolve several cases.

The British Red Cross gave valuable assistance to the FCO during the crisis

- 3.15 The FCO contacted the British Red Cross (BRC) on 26 December, to seek their assistance in meeting the needs of British nationals caught up in the tsunami. The British Red Cross is a member of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and provides relief to people in crisis both in the UK and overseas.
- 3.16 There was no pre-existing agreement or plans between the FCO and the Red Cross for co-operation in these circumstances, so the Red Cross response “on the ground” could not be quite immediate, though it was fairly rapid in the circumstances. The BRC’s response was threefold:
- the BRC set up a telephone support line on 1 January, offering advice to callers directly affected by the tsunami;
 - BRC volunteers met British nationals arriving at Gatwick and Heathrow airports, providing first aid, clothing, meals and support; and
 - a team of fifteen trained BRC volunteers – including doctors and psychologists – flew to Thailand during the two weeks from 3 January. They spent time in both Bangkok and Phuket, visiting British survivors in hospitals and providing them and their families with psychological support.
- 3.17 Because of the lesser scale of the consular emergency in Sri Lanka, there was no BRC assistance to British nationals in Sri Lanka of the kind that was provided in Thailand.
- 3.18 In March 2005, the BRC set up the Tsunami Support Network, which offers support to victims and their families through newsletters, a website and information meetings as well as the continuing telephone support line. The FCO has funded the Network’s activities to the end of May 2005, but the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is now leading on the government’s continuing support for victims and families (paragraph 3.7), and the FCO expects that the DCMS will therefore meet all or most of the future costs of the Network. DCMS took over funding of the network from May 2005. This will continue until

February 2006. Future funding has not yet been formalised although DCMS and the British Red Cross are working together to resolve the longer-term funding aspects. We **recommend** that the FCO contribute towards development, with the Treasury and other departments, of templates for funding arrangements for future crises.

- 3.19 FCO staff we spoke to were unstinting in their praise of the BRC's work during the tsunami crisis. For their part, the BRC told us that they worked well in partnership with the FCO, despite some initial unfamiliarity with each other's respective roles. The government increasingly regards the BRC as an important source of support in domestic and overseas crises, and there is a need for better communication channels and understanding between the BRC and government departments. We therefore welcome the discussions now taking place regarding a proposed service level agreement between the FCO and BRC. Both organisations are also planning for commemorative events in Thailand on the first anniversary of the Tsunami. We also **recommend** that the FCO involve the BRC (and, possibly, other voluntary organisations) in its future crisis planning, and consider including BRC officials in the makeup of future Rapid Deployment Teams.

The government has introduced an assistance package for tsunami victims and their families

- 3.20 On 29 December the government announced a package of measures to assist the victims of the tsunami and their families. The package provided more generous support than the standard consular service provided to British nationals affected by small scale incidents. It was similar to the package already available to those affected by terrorist incidents (which the FCO introduced after the Bali bombing), and was extended for the first time to victims of a non-terrorist incident. It was available to those whose expenses were not covered by travel insurance.

Contents of the tsunami victims and families assistance package

For victims

- Immediate medical expenses for those seriously injured;
- emergency medical treatment and evacuation to the UK, for all others injured;
- return luggage costs of those killed or injured; and
- a £600 contribution to the cost of counselling for victims in the UK, if this is not immediately available through the NHS.

For the families of victims

- Repatriation of bodies or mortal remains;
- business class travel to the site of the incident for two family members, including local travel and travel insurance;
- up to five nights' four-star accommodation at the site of the incident
- issuing death certificates; and
- assistance with memorials.

3.21 British tsunami victims and their families have welcomed the assistance package, which is arguably more generous than the assistance offered by some other countries. In Germany, for example, assistance was provided in accordance with the German consular law where no support was offered for victims' families to travel to the region,. Only one other country, Australia, has offered a similar package to its tsunami-affected nationals. Like the British package, the Australian package is only available to those not covered by travel insurance. It offers:

- economy flights for those returning to Australia from a tsunami-affected area;
- economy flights within Australia, for families of victims being treated in an Australian hospital;
- accommodation and living expenses for those travelling on the above flights; and

- funeral expenses in Australia, and related travel, accommodation and living expenses for immediate family members.
- 3.22 As stated above, the British tsunami assistance package is similar to the package already available to victims of terrorist incidents. There are no criteria, however, for packages of support for victims and their families in non-terrorist incidents such as the tsunami. We **recommend** that the FCO seek to establish such criteria, to improve the speed and clarity of the government's service to the victims of such incidents.

The Dutch Calamity Fund

The Netherlands has a Calamity Fund which offers financial compensation to travellers whose holiday is discontinued due to unforeseen calamities. The Fund is financed by a compulsory extra €3 on the price of all holidays. Dutch tsunami victims were assisted financially through the Fund, hence the Dutch government did not need to offer an additional assistance package.

The costs of the FCO's response to the tsunami crisis might partly be met by the Treasury

- 3.23 The Treasury holds an Emergency and Disaster Reserve (EDR), which is intended to meet the exceptional costs incurred by the government in responding to overseas consular crises. The EDR is funded from the issue of passports – 69 pence for every adult 32 page passport, £1.04 for a 48 page passport, and 17 pence for a child passport. The FCO expects to draw down funds from the EDR in order to meet part of its costs in responding to the tsunami.

Estimated claims on the Emergency Disaster Reserve

Emergency and Disaster Reserve	Balance	Claims	Net Resources
	£m	£m	£m
Balance of the EDR to 31 March 2005	7.5		7.5
Add - Estimated income since 1 April	2.2		9.7
Less - Claims from police forces:			
Period ended 31 March 2005		21.6	-11.9
Quarter ended 30 June 2005		6.4	-18.3
Quarter ended 30 September 2005		6.0	-24.3
Quarter ended 31 December 2005 (Est.)		6.0	-30.3
Less - FCO claims:			
Tsunami costs		2.5	-32.8
Non-Tsunami events (Costs presented to Treasury)		0.6	-33.4
Non-Tsunami events (Further costs estimated)		0.3	-33.7
Net deficiency as at 31 October 2005	-33.7		

Source: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as at end October 2005

The FCO is funding part of the costs of the ongoing tsunami response in Thailand

- 3.24 The Australian government engaged the services of Kenyon, a disaster management company, to assist with the response to the tsunami crisis in Thailand. Other countries, including the UK, have also benefited from the work of Kenyon in the region, especially its contribution to DVI. The FCO is reimbursing the Australian government US\$550,000 (£300,000) for its share of the Kenyon costs. The FCO has also made an initial contribution of US\$100,000 (£55,000) towards the running costs of the Thai Tsunami Victim Identification Information Management Centre (paragraph 2.35).

The FCO is responding to lessons learned across a broad front

3.25 The Department has developed an action plan following the tsunami which brings together a range of activities in the UK and at Posts. From London the actions include:

- enhanced training and guidance, for example in how to set up emergency offices;
- improvements to the composition and equipment of Rapid Deployment Teams;
- clearer guidelines for FCO / Police co-operation, including arrangements for Family Liaison Officers;
- improved casualty reporting, including exploration of more telephone answering capacity and web-based registration; and
- standing arrangements with key NGOs such as the British Red Cross.

3.26 At Posts, the action plan calls for:

- improvements to emergency plans to ensure better coverage of co-operation with Rapid Deployment Teams, EU partners and local volunteers, and for rotation of local staff; and
- Clearer arrangements for mobile communications and emergency funds.

The FCO is already implementing or working to implement the lessons, which have informed the response to subsequent crises such as the Sharm El Sheikh bombings in July 2005.