



SINGAPORE

Asian tsunami 10th anniversary: How Singapore helped

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Asia mourns tsunami dead 10 years on

Prayers and tears as Asia mourns tsunami dead 10 years on

The Singapore Home Team and Singapore Armed Forces had mounted its biggest overseas operation offering humanitarian assistance to Indonesia and Thailand in the wake of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, and the devastation left a deep impression on many participating officers.

PHOTOS

VIDEOS



Visitors view a boat carried by the 2004 tsunami waves in Banda Aceh that is now a permanent memorial ground showing the massive devastation in the capital of Aceh province located in Indonesia's western Sumatra island. (AFP/AHMAD ARISKA)

CAPTION

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia: The Indian Ocean tsunami that devastated the region 10 years ago was a test of the capabilities of those involved in humanitarian assistance. This was the Singapore Home Team and Singapore Armed Forces' biggest overseas operation, and a rite of passage for many of its officers that would linger in their memories for a long time.

Almost everyone you speak to in Banda Aceh lost someone during the tsunami - friends, relatives, even entire families. Even though 10 years have passed, the tragic event is still fresh in their minds. School teacher Erni Yuliana, 40, was trapped in her home during the tsunami, climbing onto stacked furniture to escape the rising water.

Fearing for her life, the mother of two ripped the zinc roof apart with her bare hands, and climbed on top of the house. "I didn't realise I had torn the flesh on my hands. I didn't feel anything. I wanted to see my family again," she recalled.

Locating survivors like Erni was the primary mission of the elite rescue team from the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF). They were deployed to Khao Lak in Thailand, and Banda Aceh in Indonesia. In Banda Aceh, their first mission was to find survivors at a stadium filled with about 3,000 children.

Colonel Yap Kok Boon, Director of SCDF's Training Department

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and former Commander of Operation Lionheart in Aceh still remembers the scene there vividly: "There were many dead bodies everywhere - on every corner, under every stone that we had to turn over. But unfortunately, there was no life that we could detect.

"There was also a lady who was holding a doll that belonged to her daughter, walking up and down. Each time she passed us, she would simply tell us that her daughter is somewhere still alive, and she is still searching for her. To me, she had gone beyond the state of depression and shock and she was traumatised. These are things that, even after 10 years, still linger in my mind," the colonel added.

Assistant Commissioner of Police Gerald Lim was involved in a different mission. He led a team to identify disaster victims in Phuket, Thailand. Two teams involving 36 officers joined other police agencies from more than 20 countries in this effort.

Thousands of bodies were laid out in rows inside temples. Visual recognition was impossible because of the rapid decomposition. Officers had to endure the smell, while recording finger prints and tagging bodies.

"Officers persevered and were courageous, and it brought out the humility in them," he recounted. "For some, even though they were able to deal with the bodies of adults, dealing with really young children, toddlers really broke the hearts of some of my officers who were there. They broke down, they cried, but they actually pulled through. The next day they were up again, and going back to the site."

RECALLING THE RELIEF EFFORT 10 YEARS AGO

Rescue operations in Meulaboh may have been a challenge for most servicemen, but it was the desire to rebuild lives that kept them going. This was shared by Major Vincent Yeo, a naval officer who was among the first to respond when the Asian Tsunami hit 10 years ago.

Major Yeo represented the Navy as part of the advanced party from Singapore. They assessed the devastation to determine the scale of resources and manpower required.

But to ensure help could be provided, the team had to establish suitable landing sites. Major Yeo, along with his Indonesian counterparts, managed to find areas for humanitarian aid to be delivered.

This allowed other countries to chip in as well. Major Yeo spent around 20 days helping out the people there. It was a heartwarming experience, he remembers vividly. "I am very happy that the lives of the people in Meulaboh have improved," he says.



"I still remember towards the tail end of the deployment, I met a group of children. They were playing at the school's playground. The smiles and the joy that they had on their faces really brought warmth to me and my fellow crew on the ground at that point in time," he recalls.

"We know that things are slowly returning to normal and this group of children are actually the future of Meulaboh, and we know that people of Meulaboh are resilient. They will definitely get back on their feet as soon as possible."

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