

# Lost innocence: the tsunami in the Maldives

by Heidi Brown

*The December 2004 tsunami thrust the Republic of Maldives into the public eye, changing its image overnight from idyllic honeymoon destination to disaster zone.*

This archipelago of some 1,200 coral islands has the lowest high point of any country in the world at just 2.4 metres. While the number of casualties was remarkably low, the waves caused massive devastation nationwide:

- 108 people are dead or missing.
- Thirteen of the 199 inhabited islands have been completely evacuated.
- Precious topsoil has been washed out to sea.
- More than 100 islands have lost core education, health, transport and/or communications infrastructure.
- Ten per cent of the housing stock was destroyed and much more was damaged.
- Between 15,000 and 30,000 people (5-10% of the population) were initially displaced.
- One third of the population had their lives or livelihoods severely disrupted by the disaster.

By mid-March the government's Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Unit estimated that there were at least 12,000 long-term IDPs in the country. However, there is very limited information about the true number as this population is quite mobile and many have sought shelter with extended family.

Unlike many of the other countries affected by the tsunami, the Maldives has no recent experience of natural disasters or armed conflict and so was unprepared to deal with an emergency on this scale. The challenge was made greater because the country had a limited UN presence prior to the disaster (UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO had small offices). The UK charity Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) was the only international NGO based in-country and the local NGO sector was small. As the services of the international community were in demand in so many

countries and in the absence of a national plan for dealing with IDPs, the Maldivian government faced a steep learning curve in the early stages of the disaster.

In the emergency relief phase, transport was the most significant factor limiting the distribution of water, food and medical supplies, restoration of electrical power and information gathering. The geography of the Maldives is challenging at the best of times, with the 199 inhabited islands dispersed in a strip running 850km north to south. However, much of the transport infrastructure was lost to the tsunami, with damage to airports, harbours and jetties and destruction of many boats. An entire atoll (Laamu Atoll) was out of telephone contact for several days.

## Challenges and solutions

Given these circumstances, the relief response was remarkably effective. In particular, the rapid distribution of water and food supplies and creation of sanitation facilities meant that there were no major outbreaks of infectious disease and no deaths beyond those directly caused by the tsunami. However, in the longer term, the country faces huge challenges. In addition to repairing the physical, psychosocial and economic damage inflicted by the waves and restoring pre-tsunami standards of living, there is a massive amount of work to be done to reduce the vulnerability of these tiny islands to future natural disasters, especially given predicted rises in sea level due to global climate change. The issue of IDPs clearly illustrates the delicate balancing act involved in responding to the post-tsunami needs of families and communities whilst addressing the long-term development goals of the country as a whole.

As befits a nation where each island has a unique character and strong

community identity, different solutions have evolved for the provision of temporary housing. Dormitory-style shelters were at first erected on a few islands, offering large shared sleeping areas and toilet facilities, with all meals produced by a central canteen. However, according to Mauroof Jameel of the National Disaster Management Centre<sup>1</sup>, many IDPs were unhappy sharing facilities with other families and also wished to be able to cook their own meals. This only enhanced the lack of independence felt by displaced communities who have lost access to income-generating activities, such as fishing, fish processing and tourism. As a result, this approach has been superseded by three-room units, with one family to each room and individual cooking and toilet facilities.

On other islands, host families willingly accepted displaced people into their homes. However, as it has become increasingly clear that this situation may persist for months or even years, this is likely to place an unacceptable burden on the host families. As Tracey Larman, VSO Child Protection Advisor at the Government's Unit for the Rights of Children, says: "The long-term pressure of overcrowding, lack of privacy, stress and anxiety is likely to cause problems for both host families and IDPs and has serious implications for child protection." UNFPA Maldives has warned that lack of privacy in host houses and temporary shelters poses increased risks of violence and sexual abuse against women and adolescent girls. One solution, devised for Maamigili island by Alif Dhaal, Atoll Chief, has been to construct additional rooms in the compounds of households hosting IDPs, thereby relieving overcrowding in the short term and providing a lasting benefit to the host family in return for their generosity. The government is also providing basic food supplies to host families.

In early March, the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) led a mission to the Maldives to assess conditions for the IDPs. Their preliminary report

concluded that an impressive amount of temporary housing has been constructed. However, because of a national lack of awareness of international guidelines, capacity fails to meet Sphere standards<sup>2</sup>, so construction of temporary housing is continuing in order to meet this shortfall.

The OCHA report also highlighted anxiety among IDPs due to the lack of information concerning their future. In its National Recovery and Reconstruction Plan, published in March 2005<sup>3</sup>, the Government of Maldives has committed to community consultation in long-term planning. Mauroof Jameel predicts that they will be dealing with very specific requirements from different displaced islands communities when addressing the thorny issue of relocation.

In 1998 the government introduced the Population and Development Consolidation Policy to encourage voluntary internal migration in order to reduce the number of inhabited islands. The reasons underlying this strategy include:

- The fact that historical needs for dispersal, including proximity to fishing grounds, no longer exist due to the availability of motorised transport, refrigeration and on-board fish processing.

- Duplicating infrastructure and public services on 199 islands, 59 % of which have populations below 1,000 people, spreads government resources and manpower very thinly.
- Consolidation would allow the population improved access to specialised higher-level services.

Due to strong island identities, it has previously proven difficult to persuade people to move. By displacing entire communities and destroying infrastructure on many islands, the tsunami has swept this issue to the forefront of the long-term reconstruction planning debate. Should the government rebuild islands which have been inhabited for centuries but are clearly highly vulnerable? Or should they target reconstruction funds and efforts towards relocating communities to islands with better services and enhanced environmental protection?

As part of the National Recovery and Reconstruction Plan, the government has selected five islands to be developed to host relocated populations. Priority for resettlement will be given to communities from islands with major housing damage but relocation will also be available on request to other small and vulnerable island populations. To encourage people to relocate, host islands will be developed to provide:

- residential and community facilities
- full range of public services
- diversity of economic sectors
- good transport links with other islands
- infrastructure that can accommodate further growth.

They will also be among the first islands targeted for the development of protective sand banks to reduce the impact of future tsunamis and multi-storey buildings to act as safe havens in the event of future tsunamis – strategies that will eventually be applied nationwide.

The National Recovery and Reconstruction Plan states that: ‘Resettlement and relocation of populations is totally demand-driven and voluntary.’ However, for evacuated communities, relocation will be an all-or-nothing event. If the majority of the island’s population want to move, it will be unfeasible for the remaining few to return home and reconstruct their destroyed infrastructure. Even those who move willingly will have to make huge adjustments to adapt to their new home, in addition to the trauma they experienced during the original disaster. So there will be an ongoing need for comprehensive psychosocial support.

*Maldives*



Aishath Shahula Ahmed is Counselling Coordinator at a local NGO, Society for Health Education (SHE), and Acting Coordinator of the Psychosocial Support Unit (PSU) at the National Disaster Management Centre. She described the huge challenges involved in providing psychosocial support for the many thousands of traumatised people in a country with very few trained counsellors and only one psychiatrist. The response began immediately after the event, with local professional counsellors volunteering their time. Since then the Indian Red Cross, with support from UNFPA, has conducted 'Psychological First Aid' training and Maldivian teams have visited more than 70 islands to provide basic 'ventilation' (active listening) and to spot severe

psychological trauma cases requiring referral. With assistance from UNICEF, they have also used play- and art-based therapy very effectively to help young children to come to terms with their experiences – often difficult when parents are focusing on day-to-day survival.

It is likely that the PSU will soon become a formalised section of a government ministry. Along with many other previously unfamiliar features of the disaster response, psychosocial support will become part of the everyday language of both the government and civil society in the Maldives. It will be impossible to plan for the future without referring to the tumultuous events of the recent past. Hopefully the Maldives

will be better prepared to deal with whatever nature chooses to throw at it in years to come.

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1. [www.tsunamimaldives.mv](http://www.tsunamimaldives.mv)
2. [www.sphereproject.org](http://www.sphereproject.org)
3. [www.undp.org/bcpr/disred/documents/tsunami/maldives/md\\_nrrp.pdf](http://www.undp.org/bcpr/disred/documents/tsunami/maldives/md_nrrp.pdf)
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