



1. THE EMERGENCY

SOS Italia
The air bridge
The response in the Maldives
The response in Thailand
The response in Sri Lanka
After the emergency

News of the earthquake in Southeast Asia came on a holiday, December 26, 2004. It arrived in fragments, accompanied by a period of many unknowns. Tsunami. A huge wave, or rather a series of waves that most often originate with an undersea earthquake, waves that travel amazingly fast, travelling across kilometre after kilometre of ocean, practically invisible in deep water, until they come near a coast, where they crash like enormous walls of water, swallowing up everything in their path. At 7:58 a.m. local time (1:58 Italian time) on December 26 an earthquake with its epicentre off the northwest coast of Sumatra, magnitude 9.0 on the Richter scale – the world’s fourth most powerful in the history of seismology – produced an enormous tsunami that struck and devastated entire coastal regions of countries in Southeast Asia, and reaching the East coast of Africa. Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the Maldives, India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and even Somalia and Kenya, more than 4,500 kilometres from the quake. Three hundred thousand victims, between three and five million evacuees.





1.1 SOS ITALIA

Cell phone calls made by many Italian tourists in the areas hit by the tsunami carried the alarm to Italy, with the first urgent, desperate pleas for help. The drum beat of messages and phone calls soon reached the government authorities, the Foreign Affairs Ministry, the top officials of Civil Protection, who mobilised their organisations. By 8:00 a.m. on December 26, the alarm had already reached the Civil Protection Crisis Unit, the first coordinating body to meet when the news of a calamity arrives, to assess its proportions and gather information. The real dimensions of the tragedy became clear only slowly, but it was apparent from the first contacts and first checks that something extraordinarily serious had occurred, involving even many of our citizens on vacation in various tourist locales in Southeast Asia. By 10:30, the decision (order 3389) had already been taken to respond with teams from our Civil Protection to rescue the Italians strick-



en by the tsunami. The Crisis Unit turned things over to the Operations Committee, a second organisation that met to coordinate the activities once it was decided that the emergency justified a national response. Responding to the call from the Civil Protection Department (DPC), staff from the Inter-forces Protection Operations Centre, the National Civil Aviation Administration, Alitalia, and a representative from the Foreign Affairs Ministry arrived at the table on the fifth floor of a building on Via Ulpiano in Rome, to maintain contact with the Crisis Unit that had meanwhile been set up at the Farnesina chaired directly by Minister Fini. As the Association of Tour Operators revealed that more than four thousand Italian tourists were on vacation in various Southeast Asian countries, news came – from the embassies, airports and our citizens themselves in the area who contacted Italy – of the first Italians injured or trying to get on planes at the airports, where normal flight schedules had been disrupted. In a few hours, the Operations Committee identified the areas most in need of aid, where the most Italian tourists in need were located.

1.2 THE AIR BRIDGE

The first team, led by Piero Moscardini, reached Milan to take off from Malpensa at 20:30 on December 26 on a Boeing 767 Neos-Iceland on a direct flight to Male, the Maldives. The plane was leaving empty because of the suspension – first recommended and then required by Italian authorities – of flights to the areas affected by the catastrophe.

The second team, consisting of Agostino Miozzo, team leader, personnel from the Department and a few journalists, left from Fiumicino on a scheduled Alitalia flight at 21:50 on December 26 to Colombo, Sri Lanka. A few hours later, a second plane carried to the island more personnel from the Department and the medical response group from Pisa Hospital, equipped with everything necessary to set up an Advanced Medical Post (AMP), a first aid facility with an operating room in specially prepared tents. A third Civil Protection emergency team, with Marta Di Gennaro and Ezio Galanti, the Department's Directors, and a medical team specialising in emergency medicine, left Fiumicino aboard an Alitalia B777 on the morning of the 27th for Phuket, Thailand, while first-response materials, tents and equipment for the Advanced Medical Station arrived aboard an Air Force B707. The planes carrying these rescue teams were the first to leave



Italy with the task of repatriating, on their way back, Italian and European tourists capable of travelling. Thus began the air bridge that kept the Civil Protection Operations Committee busy without interruption into the early days of January. With each flight, the planes brought home hundreds of Italians, only to take off again loaded with humanitarian aid: medicines, tents, blankets, motor pumps, water purifiers and tanks. At Fiumicino and Malpensa airports, personnel from Civil Protection, the Red Cross, law enforcement agencies, volunteer associations and regional health offices awaited passengers arriving from the disaster zones to assist them, give them food, water and clothing, and put those who had to continue on to other destinations up in hotels. The Civil Protection teams who had reached Southeast Asia were working full time to track down the missing Italians, set up an internal liaison network to get those not capable of reaching them independently to the departure airports, and provide transport for the most



seriously injured. The air bridge ended on January 3, with a total of 4,308 passengers transported to Italian airports – including 342 foreigners – and 52 flights coordinated and monitored by the Operations Committee.

1.3 THE RESPONSE IN THE MALDIVES

The Maldives suffered damages; there were problems reaching some of the smaller islands in the archipelago, and in getting to the airport, but there was no dramatic devastation except in a few areas. The work of Civil Protection was completed in four days of uninterrupted activity inside the airport, in providing assistance and especially organising the repatriation of the stranded Italians, setting boarding priorities and coordinating the departures of all the planes taking off for Italy, in a situation where confusion and stress were obviously very high. Once the repatriation phase was completed, the team split up: some

returned to Italy, while Piero Moscardini, Mimmo Fiorito and Lorella Salvatori joined Agostino Miozzo in Sri Lanka, where expert personnel were needed to consolidate the Department's presence in the northern part of the island.

1.4 THE RESPONSE IN THAILAND

The Thai island of Phuket proved to be one of the areas most seriously stricken and difficult to rescue. The Civil Protection team reached Phuket on the morning of the 28th and went immediately to Patong with the Marches ARES medical team (three doctors, three nurses and two logicians) as guests of the association of Italian immigrants in that area, which has its headquarters at the Palace Hotel. The Advanced Medical Station was set up in the hotel and a basic operations base created. Within a few hours, "Club Italia", well known to tourists and Italians in the area, became a meeting place for our fellow coun-



trymen and a veritable improvised hospital. At the same time, work began on looking for surviving Italians in the hospitals and rescue stations along the entire coast hit by the tsunami, as far as Karabi, north of Patong. Once located, the injured were picked up by bus or, if their condition was serious, by Thai army helicopters, and transported to the AMS. Fifty-one Italians were assisted and put on planes on January 2, when the Department and ARES teams and the medical station materials left for Italy.

In Thailand, the European Commission assigned personnel from the Civil Protection Department to serve as Assessment and Coordination Head of the European effort. Even in the absence of a formal appeal from the Thai government,

in response to an appeal from the European Union's Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC), Greece sent a team of 25 divers for sea searches; Portugal sent a team of seven forensic physicians; and Italy, in addition to the Civil Protection personnel, sent men from the Carabinieri and the Scientific Police specialising in DNA investigations to help the team of divers identify the many anonymous victims.

1.5 THE RESPONSE IN SRI LANKA

In Sri Lanka, the situation was disastrous, because the tidal wave had swept away everything along three-quarters of the densely populated coasts. Reaching the groups of Italians present in various areas of the island would prove to be a major undertaking. Internal communications were almost impossible because the sea's fury had in many areas destroyed the roads running along the coast, as well as the rail line; telephone lines were often interrupted, and there were problems getting fuel supplies. In Colombo, in the chaotic atmosphere of those first days, it was difficult even to find buses and vehicles capable of facing hours of travel to cover a few kilometres, like the trip organised on the night of December 27-28 to reach the Southern part of the island, which located and then brought to safety about a hundred Italians who had been isolated. In Sri Lanka, in addition to collecting Italians to be repatriated, the Civil Protection team immediately began assisting the local population, which was explicitly requested by the Sri Lankan government and immediately authorised by the Italian government. In this part of the response, the on-site inspections by the men from Civil Protection who were the first to reach the districts of Matara and Halle in the south and Trincomalee in northeast Sri Lanka pointed to the need to focus aid mainly on supplying shelter, water, food and medical assistance to the survivors. Two Operations Centres were opened in the two response areas, manned by personnel from the Department who coordinated the work of the Italians involved in rescue work, volunteers, firefighters and



medical personnel. Within a few days, in both Southern and Northern Sri Lanka, two Advanced Medical Posts (AMP) began operating, run by Italian nurses and doctors who arrived on the island together with the essential materials and equipment. The Unawatuna AMS in the South, set up on December 29, began operating the following day, taking in 72 patients in the first afternoon it was open. Volunteers from the civil protection response group of Pisa Hospital were the ones who set it up and kept it running. Volunteers from CIVES and some operators from Catania Hospital took over for them at the end of January and were relieved in turn by volunteers from the Tuscany Region health group. By March 18, 2005, when the facility was closed and turned over to the local authorities, 8,159 people had been assisted by the AMP. At Trincomalee, the Italian Civil Protection medical team arrived on January 1 and began working the day after, supporting the local medical workers and those from other countries already on the scene. The



AMP was set up near the ruins of Kinniya hospital, which had been destroyed by the tidal wave, in an area near a mosque made available for the victims. Over the next few months, the medical post was expanded into a veritable field hospital, self-sufficient in terms of equipment and operated by the doctors and nurses of the 118 Group from Liguria, then by the medical team from the National Alpine Troops Association and, finally, beginning in July 2005, by AISPO, an NGO established by San Raffaele Hospital in Milan. In addition to these associations, during the emergency many volunteers raised by the Friuli, Lazio, Marches, Calabria and Emilia Romagna Regions and from the civil protection organisations ANPAS, Misericordie, National Carabinieri Association and Prociv-Arci worked at the AMPs, in the field hospital and the tent cities.

Another problem faced by Civil Protection in the emergency phase was the thousands of people who had survived the tidal wave but were left homeless. Those who escaped the disas-



ter were received at improvised facilities, often in public buildings like schools, where every available space was used to provide shelter, but the health and living conditions in these improvised refuges were really problematic. In the South, between Matara and Galle, the Department's personnel set up 12 reception camps for a total of 534 tents. In the North 208 tents were set up in four camps. In all, the tents received from Italy housed more than four thousand people, enabling families to be reunited and affording a modicum of privacy, acceptable hygiene conditions and constant medical assistance. The problem of transporting the materials used – tents, equipment, drugs, foodstuffs, family initial support kits and other urgently needed materials – between Colombo's airport and the various areas involved in



the Department's efforts was resolved by sending two Canadairs to Sri Lanka from the Department's fleet of aircraft; they left Italy on December 31 and arrived at their destinations after four days of flying. During about three months after their arrival, the two Canadairs completed 208 missions, flying 452 hours between their base at Ratmalana airport near Colombo and the airports of Trincomalee and Kogala, in the Matara area, carrying 83 tonnes of materials and 1,198 passengers.

1.6 AFTER THE EMERGENCY PHASE

On December 31, 2004, an article by noted political commentator Henrik Brors appeared in a Swedish newspaper, Dagens Ny-

heter, criticising his government for the slowness demonstrated in rescuing Swedish tourists from the area affected by the tsunami and citing as an example Italy's Civil Protection Department, which managed to arrive immediately on the scene of the disaster, initiate rescue work quickly, and bring home not only Italians but also tourists from other countries stranded without assistance. The



article set off a debate; Sweden took seriously the problem of its civil protection efficiency and also the example pointed to by the journalist. In December 2005 an official report appeared in Sweden by the commission inquiring into the inadequacies demonstrated by that country's government after the tsunami. The report's authors pointed to Germany and Italy as examples to be imitated, for their demonstrated capacity to react quickly to the emergency. Mario Monti noted the report in an article in *Corriere della Sera*, as proof of the fact that Italian inadequacies are not genetic. In early 2006, a Swedish government delegation asked to meet with Guido Bertolaso and to study the organisational model of our Civil Protection Department. Starting in Europe, the fame of Italy's Civil Protection went around the world. Experts in the field and the leaders of Asian and South American countries began arriving in Rome: our National Civil Protection Service became the object first of curiosity and then of a certain amazement, and finally of study. The memory of the efficiency we demonstrated lingered on in Italy as well, nourished by the testimony of the Italians rescued and brought home from the disaster sites. Many of them hurried to send to the Department their expressions of gratitude and appreciation. This climate of trust and appreciation was best expressed by the President of the Republic, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, who, in March 2006, awarded the Department its second gold medal of civil merit, citing as justification the operations completed on the occasion of the tsunami.