

Providing civil protection on the other side of the world

MARCO AGNOLONI

DPC, Director of the Operations Centre – South (Matara-Galle)

Not just a morning like all the others, but the morning after the most beautiful day of the year, the day when families come together and celebrate themselves in shared customs and rituals, always the same. And yet, on such a day, unique yet like all the others, everything changed. A phone call, a voice, and then before you even realise it you're in the office questioning yourself and the others, trying to understand. What happened before, what is happening now, what to do to bring aid and rescue thousands of kilometres away.

On December 27 we were in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. At the coordinating centre, set up in the earliest phases of the emergency, people are working without a break, in agreement with the officials sent by the Foreign Affairs Ministry and in constant touch with their Crisis Unit in Rome, to get people repatriated, to provide assistance to tourists and the local population, and to manage the humanitarian aid sent from Italy. From the very first frenetic hours spent at the airport, I remember the fear and dismay expressed in the tales told by so many Italians who had witnessed the devastation. Despite it all, they managed to get to the capital, where they received assistance and medical treatment before boarding. But they were just some of the Italians present on the island, and it was imperative to get them all home.

We needed to find out where the others were, and they needed to know what to do, how to get to Colombo in order to get aboard a plane, leaving behind them not just the memory of a fantastic vacation in a faraway

exotic land, but the knowledge that they had escaped one of the worst tragedies any people have ever seen. The Italian tourists were mainly concentrated in the Southern part of the island.

For this reason, in a small van crammed with us, fuel and water, we left in the night for the south, towards Galle.

“ We ate only fruit, drank only bottled water; we were careful of everything, sleeping completely covered up. “The insects will get you! Sleep with the fan on; the air will keep the malaria bearers away”

In the centre of the city, by the seaside with its squares, shops and fish market, we found boats swept up by the violence of the waves, piled up against the walls of houses, and crumpled buses dragged for dozens of metres in a tangle of sheet metal and rubble.

And then the lifeless bodies of men, women and children that the sea had begun returning to what a few hours before had been a green lawn where people played cricket, the national sport. Cell phones were getting SMS after SMS from Italians trying to be rescued, or concerned for the fate of other Italians, and we tried to find them in that Dantean circle. We brought them together and sent them on buses collected in the villages to Colombo, along with other tourists, French, Germans and English. We ate only fruit, drank only bottled water; we were careful of everything, sleeping completely covered up. “The insects will get you!” Edmondo Ciappina warned us; we all called him

“Mondy”, an Italian who has lived in the area for some years, knew everyone and, luckily, quickly became one of us. “Sleep with the fan on; the air will keep the malaria bearers away”. When the tents arrived for the Advanced Medical Post, the volunteers from Pisa wasted no time. There was no time. In a few hours we assembled the facility that would become the most important operations centre in the South – another one was set up a few days later in Trincomalee, in the Northeast, by a team consisting of personnel from the Department, firefighters, and the National Alpine Corps Association – and everything was ready for providing relief to anyone who showed up at the tent. Our ankles terribly swollen from fatigue, the humidity and the oppressive heat, we never stopped even for a moment responding to the many requests for aid.

The Pisan volunteers, and the others – the Sicilians and

international airport, the other at the Ratmalana military airport – and finally in the daily resupply of the two operations centres, which was done first by bus and truck, then by two Canadairs, which in fact were the only means of air transport belonging to a foreign country that were authorised to fly on the island. In our “blue villages” – blue being the colour of our tents – hundreds of Hindus, Buddhists, Catholics and Muslims found shelter. The people of Sri Lanka are endowed with unequalled dignity, and despite the profound injury, they quickly recovered and, with their bare hands, set about digging in the rubble to find the little that had not been destroyed, just to have something to start over with.

The emergency from the air

PAOLO BETTINELLI

DPC, Coordinator of the Unified Air Operations Centre Unificato (COAU)

The COAU, or Unified Air Operations Centre of the Department of Civil Protection, is a place that is always calm, but a telephone call is enough to interrupt that. Then things turn frenetic, to ensure the immediate departure of an airplane or helicopter for some mission, or to send a rapid-response team. Of course, on that December 26 the news and images that had been coming in since morning quickly made everyone forget Christmas and the holidays, auguring a period of intense air activity. As the hours passed, the scenario for a possible initial response became clearer: beyond the humanitarian aid, which would be concentrated mainly on Sri Lanka, we were focused on sending specialised teams to serve as a bridgehead for subsequent deliveries of materials, vehicles and personnel to proceed to the recovery of the Italians stricken by the tsunami while on

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Tuscans who took turns, their every move filled with love and dedication – were truly incredible. Also incredible was the logistical work done by the coordinating unit in Colombo, constantly involved in getting urgently needed medical materials, instruments and tents from Italy through customs, then storing them in warehouses made available by the Sri Lankan authorities – located in Colombo, one near the

vacation. The city of Phuket (Thailand) was where most of our stranded fellow countrymen were concentrated. On December 27 the first aircraft (an Air Force Boeing B-707) left for Phuket. The dramatic nature of the situation quickly made us realise that, unfortunately, the planes would be returning not just with passengers of various nationalities but also with the remains of some less fortunate tourists. The list of materials loaded on board therefore included food, medicines, first-aid

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materials and stretchers, and alongside the list of the living there was the list, fortunately with only a few names on it, of the deceased. We were very afraid that there would be a great many victims. A team of specialised Carabinieri left for Thailand in the first days after the catastrophe to identify our fellow countrymen from among the thousands of victims of the tidal wave, but fortunately, after months of work, the specialists confirmed that there were far fewer Italian victims of the tragedy than we had expected at the start. But in those days at the end of December 2004, there was not much time to think because of the many things to arrange, the coordinating to be done; cell phones rang

constantly, loading lists were constantly being updated, and then there were endless meetings where people asked for data, information and situation reports. With the return home of the last tourists from Italy and other – mainly European – countries as of January 3, 2005, the first phase of our air activity coordinating and management effort ended; we had been in the forefront of organising 22 missions of military aircraft and 14 leased civilian planes, which brought rescue teams and emergency materials to Male, Phuket and Colombo and returned loaded with passengers picked up in the areas hit by the tsunami. The second phase concerned the mission of our Canadairs in Sri Lanka. In the first few hours, in the face of the images of so many villages destroyed and isolated from the rest of the world, consideration had been given to sending our amphibious aircraft (Canadair CL 415s), normally used for fighting forest fires but which could have been useful for search, rescue and recovery operations for people and materials. But we quickly realised that the operations area was too distant to get there in time to participate in rescue and recovery operations. The idea of using Canadairs in Southeast Asia became reasonable again when the response in Sri Lanka took on the dimensions of a humanitarian aid operation: our aircraft could carry people and materials to various places along the entire coastline, where most urban settlements were located and where the destructive power of nature had swept away or seriously damaged the road system, rendering many places unreachable by land. With authorisation from the Sri Lankan government, two Canadairs left on December 31 with Colombo as their initial destination. New Year's Eve, with pilots and crew in the air: with a cruising speed of

about 270 km/hour, it took several stops before the two Canadairs reached Colombo on January 3, 2005. Colombo's international airport was the only one able to ensure 24-hour arrival, unloading and storage of the huge amounts of materials arriving from all over the world, creating intense traffic that slowed the operability of our resources. After a few days at the airport in Colombo, agreements with the Sri Lankan military and aeronautical authorities enabled us to identify the Ratmalana airport as the final base for the Canadairs. After a preliminary study of the overall airport situation and the political situation in the areas under the influence of the Tamil separatists, Canadair flights began between the Ratmalana airport (where materials and personnel from Italy arrived on civilian and military aircraft) and the airports of Trincomalee at China Bay, Koggala, and Batticaloa.

Our aircraft enabled us to carry materials, food and personnel much faster than we could have by land, allowing us to set up in a few days a series of tent cities, fully equipped and serviced, and the Kinniya field hospital. An Air Force officer belonging to the COAU had been invited to Sri Lanka to coordinate the air activity; he was involved in assisting with all operations, from customs clearance to temporary storage, from preparation of the cargo manifest to scheduling flights. There were certainly many problems to be solved, especially at the start, until the procedures and methodology had been worked out and consolidated. This went from collecting personal documentation for check-in recognition to the search for a power lift for loading the Canadairs, from checking land conditions at destination airports to coordinating manpower for unloading and transporting the materials leaving with

the aircraft. Complicating the coordinating effort, difficult enough in itself, there was the additional time needed for travel between the Italian Embassy in Colombo, where all activities were planned and scheduled, and the Ratmalana military airport, where the execution phase began and where it was essential to have good relations with the local military authorities. In early January consideration had also been given to using other Air Force transport aircraft, like the C-130 or G-222, to speed up cargo movements, especially for heavier and bulkier cargo, since the Canadairs were

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able to carry a maximum of two tonnes. Unfortunately, because of the precarious runway conditions that did not meet the minimum requirements for the military aircraft, and after a careful on-site inspection by personnel from the 46th Air Brigade in Pisa, it was determined that such use was impossible. After the first major effort and after the initial difficulties were overcome, by January 20 the organisational machine managed to prepare and equip all areas for proper ground assistance, especially at Trincomalee and Koggala, enabling the air activity to proceed steadily and allowing all the objectives set by the Department to be met. Not only the Civil Protection teams but also many local government figures, people from the United

Nations and other organisations present in Sri Lanka left on the Canadairs from Ratamalana, along with various Italian political figures visiting the country to evaluate the situation and the work done by Civil Protection in providing emergency relief and starting reconstruction. Those of us who experienced this event both in Italy and in Sri Lanka came away highly satisfied with an effort that saw many men and women in the Department and from other operational facilities of Italy's Civil Protection participating in a coordinated, organised effort, in a job carried out as always with so much passion, skill, self-denial and sense of duty that brought not only concrete aid to those populations but also a deep and heartfelt sense of solidarity. The air effort associated with the tsunami ended on April 20, 2005, with the return to Italy of our Canadairs. The balance sheet for the operation is significant: 208 missions on the island, 452 hours of flight, 83 tonnes of materials transported and a total of 1198 passengers.

Thirty-six hours

ROBERTO FORINA

DPC, Press coordinator for the temporary mission facility in Sri Lanka

The scene was so dramatic that I had difficulty believing it. I had just fallen asleep; we had stayed up late celebrating Christmas, and I had trouble organising my thoughts. A few hours later, in the operations room, I was informed that I was in the advanced team that would be leaving for Sri Lanka. The other two were headed for the Maldives and for Thailand, the three favourite destinations of Italian tourists in Southeast Asia.

In the air after the briefing, we knew the best thing was to sleep, not knowing how long it would be before we could sleep again, but the excitement, expectation and anxiety from lack of information made any attempt futile. The plane was a 767; there were no more than twenty of us on board, including Department personnel and journalists we were giving a ride to. The plan was to use the same plane to bring back to Italy as many people as we could manage to find in the first few hours. No one broached the subject, but the silence of the 300 empty seats was fair noisier and more cumbersome than our excitement. Would we be able to fill it? Were there survivors? And above all, how many could we find?

When the plane's doorway opened, the hot, humid air of Sri Lanka hit us and for a moment took our breath away. The airport was in chaos; the eyes of the tourists of all nationalities showed terror and desperation, as if the only possible salvation were getting on board, no matter what the destination: the only thing that matters was to flee the tsunami. The tales they told reinforced the fear, multiplying the desire to flee from the wave; we had to go in the opposite direction. Filling the plane was not a problem.

We left Colombo at one in the morning, but aboard a van we were taking to get to the South coast, passing through the interior of the island; we did not feel like talking. The darkness was impenetrable; the stench of gasoline in the tanks we were carrying was nauseating; the potholes that tossed us around constantly made it worse. From time to time, passing through tiny villages, some light enabled us to glimpse fragments of houses, then the darkness returned to envelop everything, and the somewhat cross-eyed headlights of the van again lit

up what was little more than a trail that forced us to proceed at a few tens of kilometres per hour. At the first light of dawn, we stopped for a final rest before the coast. Around us, colours and fragrances began to take shape, letting us forget the smog and confusion of the city. As the sun rose, the light took control of a world that for us was absolutely new; the jungle all around showed itself in an infinity of incredible colours, sounds and cries. For a while, we forgot where we were and why: it seemed like paradise.

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We had been going downhill for a while, and the increasingly frequent villages we passed through announced that we were about to reach the coast. On the road, endless numbers of people were coming and going – on foot, in carts, aboard pickup trucks and old cars, or on improbable buses crammed to the roof, honking constantly above the shouts of the people – and made us think there was nothing different from the day before, or before that.

From the curve atop the last hill, we had glimpsed the sea, and from there, too, we noted nothing strange. We

thought that perhaps this stretch of coast had been spared because it was too far away – besides, we were more than 2,000 kilometres from the epicentre! – or perhaps because we were on a more sheltered side of the island. Perhaps the scene we had imagined was more disastrous than the reality. Now we had almost finished passing through the centre of town; the intact houses prevented us from seeing the sea; at every turn that took us closer to the beach, the hope that we would find nothing abnormal grew greater. Then the final turn brought us in sight of what had been the seaside: We learned later that we were at the fish market where, at the time the wave hit, the stands were crowded with people. We had to stop the van; it was impossible to go on except on foot, climbing over a formless tangle of everything imaginable. To the left and to the right there was nothing but a pile of debris as far as the eye could see, remains of boats, uprooted trees, cars, furniture, fishing nets and dozens of lifeless bodies. It was as if a berserk road roller had knocked over and crushed everything and then disappeared over the horizon. We realised that for some time we had been surrounded by silence. The people, the shouting, the horns, the noise that had followed us until then had disappeared; in front of us the sea was the colour of mud, and dogs were the only living beings. We remained, paralysed, for I don’t know how long, what seemed an eternity, but perhaps it was only a few moments. With difficulty, without using our hands, we climbed over the first pile of smelly, muddy rubble, then another and another, until we reached what must have been the road, but it was difficult to say.

I remember the briny, pungent smell – I recognised the smell of rotting fish – the heat, the humidity, the sweat,

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and another smell that I did not recognise but which was to become familiar. I don't know why but I thought of Jakarta. Then it became too much. I vomited.

When we resumed, we heard the helicopters. To the right the road headed away from the sea and curved; we followed it, walking among the rubble, thinking we'd find someone or something.

Around the curve, everything changed completely.

Before us there was a large, open plaza; on the left, the imposing hulk of the fortress that the Portuguese built that later became an English army base separated us from the sea. It was, or at least it seemed, incredibly

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intact. The large gate that guarded the centre of the plaza was closed as if someone wanted to keep the disaster out. On the opposite side, two tall Western-style buildings served as wings to the little huts that were piled up behind them one on top of the other. The upper floors were intact; the big windows revealed well-dressed mannequins with typical local clothes and colours, restaurant tables set for service, and office desks. But it was as if they were from another world. The first two or three floors were completely empty; even the stairways had been swept away; only the

columns remained to hold the weight of the before and after. Piled up against the buildings, the carcasses of buses that 48 hours before linked the plaza to the rest of the region and the country. On the second floor, hanging there, half sticking out, there was one that had likely been about to leave or had just arrived. Inside we could see bodies, but no movement. The helicopters were landing and taking off without a letup from a clearing off to the side, burned by the salt, at the far end of the plaza, almost behind the fortress. In front, on the town side, the first army trucks were starting to arrive, with small, bewildered soldiers getting out of them. An officer shouted orders that we didn't understand, but right after that groups of soldiers went off in all directions. We split up, some of us going towards the officer, while two of us headed for the clearing. It was no more than a hundred meters away, but armed soldiers kept us at a distance; however, we managed to see some soldiers who, with their bare hands, some covering their nose and mouth with a handkerchief or rag, loaded something onto the helicopters that they were taking from a nearby heap. They quickly took off towards the sea. We tried to get around the guards and then ran into what may have been the reason for the blocked path. I recall the ANSA correspondent, with his curly, grey-flecked hair and beard, as he dictated his piece. With a kerchief around his neck, he enunciated the words into the cell phone: Sri Lanka, corpses burned to prevent epidemics. Smoke was still rising, together with the smell.

Meanwhile our driver had managed to get around the plaza and had joined us; we got on board to continue along the coast towards the north. Through the windows, we could see the painstaking work of the tidal

wave: for hundreds of meters from the sea, nothing but piles of debris and animal carcasses. I see again and relive every stop on that trip in news agency headlines: “Wandering among the dead in the hell of Galle, a

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ghost town”, and “Sri Lanka, common graves with tourists in the Southern part of the island”. At times, near small hills we came across every so often, there were a few poor houses that had been spared, but for the most part what we saw speeding by outside the windows, kilometre after kilometre, were scenes of survivors weeping for the dead in front of the remains of what had been their homes, poorly dressed people digging among the piles of debris in search of something to use to build improvised shelters, or perhaps in the hope of finding a bottle of water. Everywhere we asked for news of Western tourists; the response was always yes, but when we asked where we could find them, everyone just shook their head and shrugged. The train running daily from Colombo to Matara and then returning was called the “Queen of the Sea”. A narrow-gauge railway left by the English, the only train on the island, used almost like a tram. Always

impossibly full of noisy people. Ten cars for a thousand or more passengers, more like a sardine tin than a real train. The village was called Peraliya, five hundred souls in a corner of paradise set in a picture-postcard palm grove facing a velvet beach with palms running down to the sea. Peraliya was one of the countless train stops, and it was there that it happened, as some were getting off while others were getting on. Two of the ten cars were found days later hundreds of meters inland; the other eight and the engine had become one with the palm trees and the rubble of the village. One of the locals told us there were survivors: four. They included a four-year-old boy saved by the instinctive act of his mother. He was in the first car, and the train’s engineer, one of the survivors, had heard him beating his fists against the window. Nothing to be done for the father and mother, no one to answer his questions.

Only thirty-six hours had passed since I had gotten out of my bed in Rome, but the memory was hazy, without details, distant, as if it was not me, perhaps because I was no longer that person.

Behind the scenes

PAOLO VACCARI

DPC, Emergency Management Office

A light burning continuously on the fifth floor of a building in Via Ulpiano, in the centre of Rome. Behind the small windows, a blur of shadows, a little anthill in constant motion. It was December 26, 2004, and the Emercom room had become a second home for many of us: it took only a few minutes to get oriented, and we were part of the event. There is no time to follow the news or flip through the newspapers: we ate lunch,

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dinner and breakfast in front of the computer, with a distracted eye on the large, silent screens conveying the CNN mages, one hand always on the telephone. Outside it was night, but it didn't matter much; the room was synchronised with the time in Phuket, Colombo and Male.

A whole new geography to be learned, immense physical and cultural distances, unknown languages and places with unpronounceable names, time differences that do not allow responses in real time, a constantly evolving effort to acquire more information and data in order to be able to get a clear picture of the needs: these were the challenges weighing down on us.

Every emergency is a unique case. Although it is possible to apply procedures established and tested during exercises, the reality is always different, unforeseeable in its infinite nuances, especially in a case like this one where the uniqueness involved not only the type of event, hitherto unknown at that intensity, but also its extent, which took in a large part of a continent: and so we spoke of a "Southeast Asia Emergency", or SEAE.

The first rescue teams were in the air, and the large table in the room was already populated with men and women of differing origins and roles, civilian and military, public and private, parts of a system that had to respond moment by moment to a constantly changing picture, officials from the Foreign Ministry alongside mobile phone technicians, Air Force officers together with Red Cross health workers; holding them all together were the Department's offices, silently collecting data and taking requests, producing summary reports, maps and statistics, and presenting operational solutions to meet immediate demands: managing an air

bridge to bring home all the Italians in any way involved in the catastrophe, and assistance to our rescue teams sent to Thailand, the Maldives and Sri Lanka.

The work never ceased: from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. for the first shift, from 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. for the second; at the end of each shift a briefing to update top management and pass on instructions to those taking over.

The shifts changed, and new actors came to sit around the table; the configuration changed to meet the next objective: to offer assistance to anyone who had survived but lost everything. Our efforts focused on one

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country: Sri Lanka. We received the requests for aid; lists of goods were tweaked and passed on to the Regions and associations to channel their contributions; available cargo planes were reserved, cargo lists prepared, and transport logistics arranged. The room turned into the coordinating centre of an industrial shipper: there were people studying the technical characteristics of water purifiers and pumps and others calculating weights and mass to optimise

The emergency

the load of every flight. Cargo manifests, customs forms, ground logistics all became an everyday language for some of us.

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Often the painstaking work ran into customs bureaucracy, with the result that 20 tonnes of medicines countersigned one by one remained blocked at the destination airport because they had been unloaded higgledy-piggledy by some employee taking pains to undo the packages but not in putting the medicines back in their labelled boxes. We had to send a pharmacist on site to make order out of the thousands of packages.

The walls of the room were covered in large maps showing our battlefield; red, yellow and green pins marked the number of reception camps set up and the medical stations active, the distribution of personnel and volunteers.

There was a certain virtual aspect to our efforts: we facilitated processes by identifying assets, collecting them and sending them to their destination; we tested systems to make the organisational machine more effective; we provided updated pictures of the situation, but the concrete effects of our work were being seen only thousands of kilometres away.

Bringing us back to reality was the emotion we felt at three in the morning when we spoke to our colleagues in Trincomalee, Galle and Colombo, distant voices swollen with fatigue to whom we could offer assistance, dialogues that filled our day with meaning. The shift ended and we went home, tired but calm, with the feeling that we had done our part, even behind the scenes.

