Aid agencies ignored special needs of elderly people after tsunami

Ganapati Mudur *New Delhi*

Elderly people who survived the Asian tsunami on 26 December last year were unable to get health care, food aid, or cash support because relief packages were not specially designed for them, the non-profit agency HelpAge International has said.

Despite attempts in the past to highlight the vulnerability of elderly people during emergencies, the tsunami relief effort did not take into account the special needs of this group in its initial phase, the agency said in a report released last week.

The tsunami killed more than 300 000 people. It displaced about 92 000 people over the age of 60 in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Describing the plight of elderly survivors of the tsunami in the four countries, the report said these people became "almost invisible" when relief material was distributed. Many elderly people reported being pushed out of the way by younger people in the chaotic distribu-

tion of relief. The report has called on government agencies to include elderly people in needs assessment after disasters and to develop relief packages that are tailored to them.

The report said that elderly people in Indonesia and Thailand had difficulty getting cash allowances from the government in the absence of support

mechanisms. In Sri Lanka some elderly people reported receiving no monetary compensation to restart livelihoods.

"It's disappointing," said Mathew Cherian, chief executive of HelpAge India. "Neither the government machinery nor the international aid fraternity recognised the vulnerability of the elderly. We had drawn attention to how older people in India suffered after the Orissa cyclone in 1999 and the Gujarat earthquake in 2001."

Many elderly tsunami survivors with chronic illnesses such as diabetes and cancer faced

hardship in resuming treatment, as they had lost their medical papers or could not travel, the report said.

Special diets for elderly people with diabetes or high blood pressure were not available in the relief packages, and relief workers did not know about the dietary problems of elderly people.

"In a crisis situation relief workers usually focus on children and the young, because of mistaken perceptions that the elderly do not need the same level of support," said Indira Jai Prakash, professor of psychology at the University of Bangalore, who has helped train disaster counsellors.

HelpAge researchers said that psychosocial services for elderly people were "totally inadequate" and that the recovery of elderly people was hindered by the lack of special attention. They want governments to recognise elderly people as vulnerable and to begin to outline response programmes that specifically support them. □

CHRIS STOWERS/PANOS

HelpAge researchers said that psychosocial services for elderly people after the 26 December tsunami were "totally inadequate"

The Impact of the Indian Ocean Tsunami on Older People: Issues and Recommendations is available at www.helpage.org

Agencies scale up African relief

Chibuzo Odigwe *Calabar, Nigeria*

The United Nations, aid agencies, and governments of rich countries are scaling up relief efforts to try to bring the food crisis in Niger and neighbouring areas under control.

Khaled Adly, acting regional director of the UN's World Food Programme in west Africa, said: "The generosity of donor countries and individuals has been tremendous over the past three weeks, but we still need more contributions to ensure that the people of Niger have enough food to get them through to the harvest in about 10 weeks' time." The programme's \$58m (£32m; €47m) appeal has so far raised only \$33m.

The World Food Programme and other aid agencies, such as Médecins Sans Frontières and Oxfam, are playing a leading part in the worst affected areas. Together with other

international non-governmental organisations and Niger's government the programme has begun to distribute free food to 2.5 million people.

The programme's public information officer, Stephanie Savariaud, said: "The food crisis in Niger is a consequence of a combination of factors. There has always been a chronic malnutrition problem in Niger, and people live on a thin line, which makes them very vulnerable to shocks. Last year's drought and locust invasion made things worse. People have very little food or no more food in reserve. The prices in the whole subregion have skyrocketed. The problems in Niger are structural: 82% of the population depend on agriculture to survive, and only 15% of the land is suitable for cultivation."

The World Food Programme is running six inpatient nutri-

tional rehabilitation centres in Niger and 33 outpatient programmes to treat children with severe malnutrition. About 16 000 severely malnourished children have been treated since the beginning of the year, it says. These children get specialised food and medical care and when discharged go home with enough food for the whole family.

Some aid agencies have put the blame for the extent of the crisis on the international community. Natasha Kofoworola Quist, Oxfam's regional director for west Africa, said: "If Niger had received the same level of aid as Iraq, a much richer country, this crisis may never have happened."

According to Oxfam, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso get \$12, \$19, \$20, and \$13 respectively per person per year in aid, in contrast to Iraq's \$91. The UN estimates that about \$45 per person per year in aid is needed in these countries for its millennium development goals to be achieved.

However, Niger's President Mamadou Tandja, in reacting to the assessment of the situation by the UN and aid agencies, told the BBC: "There is no famine in Niger. The people who are saying there is a famine either have a political interest or an economic interest."

"It has been said that \$45m have been donated to Niger. But we have only received \$2.5m. The rest we only hear about," he said.

He added: "We are experiencing a food crisis due to the poor harvest and locust attacks of 2004."

However, opposition politicians do not agree and say that the crisis reflects the failure of the government's fight against poverty.

Kassoum Issa, head of the Democratic Coordination of Civil Society in Niger, told Associated Press: "This famine... quite simply shows the failure of the programme of the fight against poverty conducted by the president. The people of Niger are dying." □