Disease threatens millions in wake of tsunami

Peter Moszynski *London*

With a confirmed death toll of almost 150 000, the earthquake that devastated countries bordering the Indian Ocean on 26 December is one of the worst natural disasters in living memory, prompting the biggest peace time aid operation in history.

According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, "Latest estimated deaths are over 146 000 (anticipated to rise to over 185 000), with over 525 000 injured, over 20 000 missing, close to 1.6 million displaced, and over 1 million estimated homeless."

Although the major impact was felt by India, Indonesia, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka, several other countries have been affected: Bangladesh, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand in Asia; and Kenya, Somalia, and Tanzania in Africa.

Dr Lee Jong-wook, director general of the World Health Organization, said: "This is the most serious natural disaster to affect the region for several decades. The health needs of the populations affected are immediate and substantial."

Although by 3 January WHO had received no reports of major epidemics, the organisation warned: "Millions of people are now under serious threat of disease outbreaks as a result of damaged water and sanitation systems, sea water contamination, and the congested and crowded conditions of the displaced."

"There is an immediate increased risk of waterborne diseases—that is, cholera, typhoid fever, shigellosis, and hepatitis A and E—related to unsafe drinking water and inadequate sanitation. Outbreaks of these diseases could occur at any moment."

WHO emphasised that ensuring uninterrupted provision of safe drinking water was the most important preventive measure to be implemented after flooding, but it listed other important steps that had to be taken.

"The use of standard treatment protocols in health facilities with agreed upon first line drugs is also crucial to ensure effective diagnosis and treatment for acute respiratory infections, malaria, sexually transmitted

infections and for the main epidemic-prone diseases (including cholera, dysentery, typhoid, hepatitis, dengue, leptospirosis, measles, meningitis)," it said.

It cautioned: "Logistical matters, including transport, accommodation, and communications, are posing serious challenges to any relief efforts."

Operations in the two worst affected areas, Indonesia's Aceh province and Sri Lanka, have been further hampered by both

monsoon floods and simmering internal conflicts, and in Sri Lanka the United Nations has warned that landmines pose a serious hazard to displaced people and an obstacle to relief efforts.

"Mines were floated by the floods and washed out of known mine fields, so now we don't know where they are, and the warning signs on mined areas have been swept away or destroyed," said Unicef. □

A woman sits among the debris of her destroyed home in the town of Hambantota, about 200 km south of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Charities and rock stars join forces to tackle world poverty

Lynn Eaton *London*

Rich countries should increase aid and make it work better for poor people, cancel world debt, and change the rules of world trade so that they favour the interests of the poor. That was the new year's message to Britain's prime minister, Tony Blair, from a coalition of more than 100 UK charities, trades unions, and campaigners, including rock and pop stars.

Their Make Poverty History

campaign, which was launched on 1 January, came as the tsunami disaster in South East Asia brought harrowing television images of the tragedy directly into the homes of those in the developed world, highlighting the conditions of poorer countries.

The coalition, which includes Oxfam, Wateraid, and the World Medical Fund, is calling on Mr Blair to change the unfair

trade rules and high levels of debt that hinder the developing world. It is part of a global call to action, a worldwide movement that will come together at key points during 2005.

According to the organisation's report, Malawi spends more on servicing the country's debt than on health, despite nearly one in five Malawians being HIV positive. And in Zambia, debt repayments to the International Monetary Fund cost \$25m (£13m; €19m) more than the budget for education, it says.

The report also highlights the situation in Ghana, where the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have

insisted that the country open up its agricultural markets as a condition of receiving aid. US rice now floods the country, and the domestic rice market has collapsed as a result, it says.

Adrian Lovett, 2005 project director at Oxfam, speaking on behalf of Make Poverty History, said: "It is time for the UK government to change key policies and put pressure on other world leaders to do the same. At the end of 2005, Blair and the other world leaders will be judged on whether they delivered a breakthrough." □

For information on the campaign see www.makepovertyhistory.com