

Thailand Resort Region Hit

Hundreds of tourists from Sweden, Finland and elsewhere in Europe were killed or injured along with Thai villagers and hotel staff as the tsunami hit Phuket, Khao Lak and Phi Phi Island.

It was a quiet Sunday morning when Kevan noticed water rushing into the street at Kata Beach on the Southern Thai resort island of Phuket on the Andaman Sea.

The South African scuba instructor rushed down to the beach to take pictures as the sea withdrew hundreds of yards, exposing the coral reef. Next thing he knew, the water was back—up to his neck—and he had to swim for his life.

Some 5,400 people died and another 3,000 are still missing and presumed dead in Thailand after the tsunami hit, an hour or so after it hit Banda Aceh. Many were tourists from Sweden, Finland, Germany and elsewhere vacationing with their families at Khao Lak, about two hours drive north of Phuket.

“It was not clear for a number of days where the center of this disaster was,” said Tom Dolan, Bangkok chief of USAID’s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance.

“Reports started coming first from Phuket, where tourists were hit. We knew Sri Lanka was also serious. But we only learned that most people had died in Banda Aceh later on.”

The first reports of the tsunami came from Phuket where injured and distraught European tourists told how the powerful currents separated them from spouses and children who later drowned.

USAID gave \$300,000 to the Thai Red Cross but the Thai government organized relief and did not require much foreign help.

Six weeks after the tsunami, Phuket’s principal tourist town of Patong had largely repaired the damage—stores were rebuilding, businesses were operating, tourists were returning and only a few tell-tale patches of rubble remained.

Survivors told harrowing tales of heroism—about Thais and tourists who raced into the surf to rescue others, or piloted boats collecting those swept out to sea by the waves.

The Moken or Sea Gypsies who live on boats in the Andaman Sea coastal islands survived because they interpreted the withdrawal of the water and silence of some insects as a sign that a giant wave was coming.

U.S. Government Aid to Thailand

Aid totaling \$1.06 million as of April 1, 2005 included:

● One airlift valued at \$700,000

● Water containers for 20,000 people

● Hygiene kits for 33,000 people

● Plastic shelters for 1,700 people

● \$100,000 to the Thai Red Cross

● Restoration of fisheries and fishing infrastructure \$750,000

Thai authorities wanted people to rebuild away from the water’s edge and have been searching for new living sites.

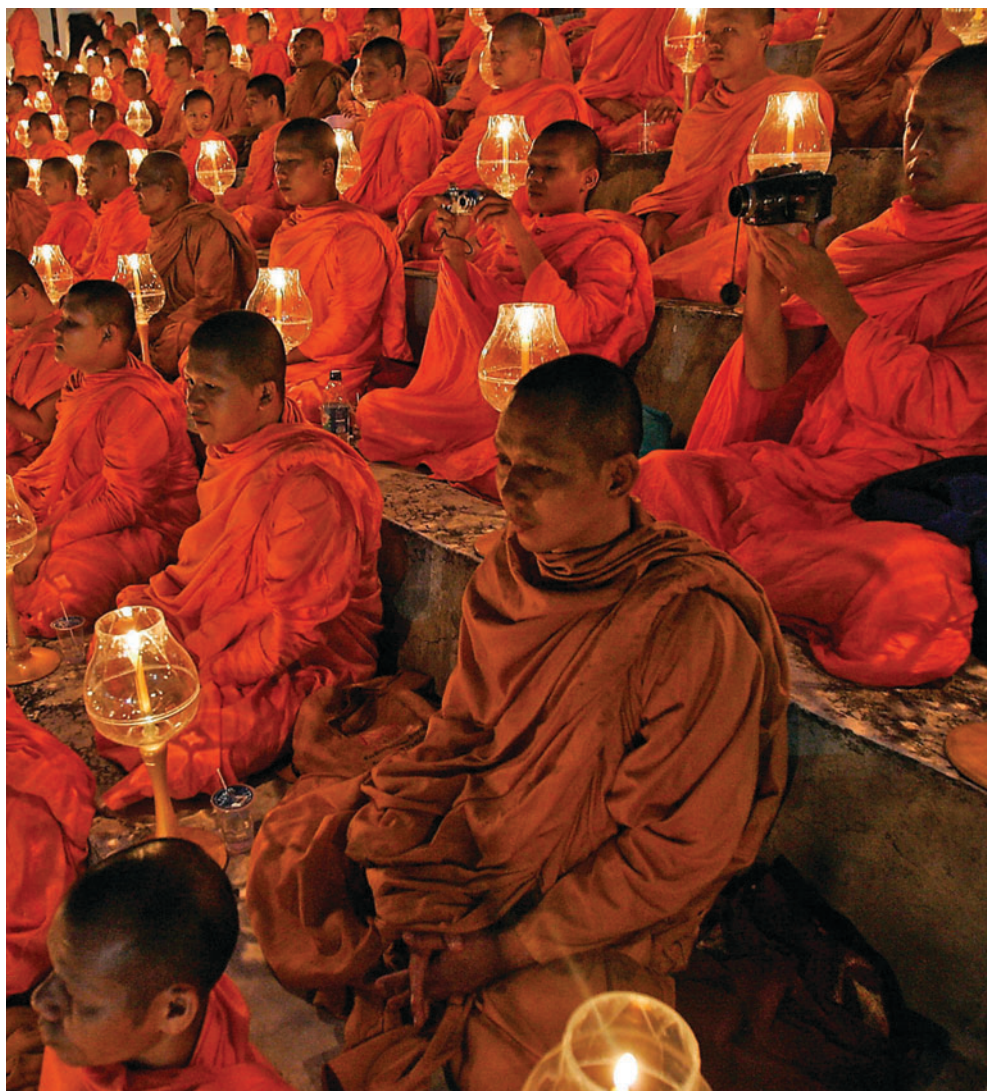
U.S. military forensic experts from Hawaii set up a team to help identify the tsunami remains.

As in the other tsunami-affected countries, Thailand’s overall economic growth remained little changed by the tsunami’s impact and was expected to be around 5 percent.



ABOVE: Thais work on fixing their fishing boats that were damaged by the tsunami.

RIGHT: Buddhist monks chant prayers for victims January 5 in Phuket, Thailand at a mourning ceremony in a soccer stadium.



DAVID LONGSTREATH/AP/WORLD WIDE PHOTOS