



who you GONNA CALL?

HUMANITY WRAP
By Roger Beaumont

January 2nd

Nothing else matters. Even other news. As for shopping, entertainment, end-of-year celebrations, they all seem trivial, meaningless, even selfish. It's too close to home. Too raw to ignore. The Earth has reminded us that it has only to shift in its slumber, to twitch the smallest patch of its tectonic skin, and plans will be sent scattering, hopes washed away.

Like all disasters, it has brought out the best (volunteers) and the worse (looters) in humanity. Disasters show how quick we are to help and, unfortunately, how quick we are likely to forget.

As the wider picture emerges, a sense of helplessness prevails. One brief geological shrug, deep down and out of sight, outguns by far the terrorists and warmongers. The dead hang in trees, lie crushed in wreckage, wash up on beaches. Millions of livelihoods built up by ingenuity and hard work are casually swept away. The poorest suffer most.

Yet in every disaster the effect is of a kicked ants' nest, swarming to rebuild. After the first blow, human busyness reasserts itself. In this the Thais have been brilliant. And it is now possible for the whole world to watch that scurrying determination. Formal news media, of necessity, put tragedy in the foreground. But with the Internet and unprecedented communications technology, the view is a little different: from Web sites across the world – the BBC news site is remarkable – we get individual, eccentric humanity, expressing everything from solipsism to shining heroics.

Two images have already stuck: "... passports and driving licences stuck out of the mud and sand, as did a copy of the Dalai Lama's 'Book of Wisdom' and a child's toy

telephone" and the Australian guy who woke up late with a hangover in a hotel in Phuket, went out on his balcony and saw "a one-metre shark slowly circling a tuk tuk in what was once the swimming pool".

Then there are the irate. One woman wrote to the London Daily Telegraph: "Am I alone in finding the pictures of British tourists fleeing Thailand, Sri Lanka, the Maldives extremely distasteful? Those same tourists were quite happy to use these (by Western standards) impoverished countries as their playground but couldn't wait to abandon them when things went wrong. Did it occur to any of these pampered Westerners to stay on for the rest of their holiday time and actually help the poor devils whose lives, homes and livelihoods had been so cruelly snatched from them?"

For your information, madam, many of them did and are still helping where they can.

The geophysicists at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre in Honolulu were on duty on Christmas Day when the massive subterranean earthquake struck off Sumatra. They knew for hours of the impending catastrophe.

As we now know, a mere 18 minutes after the earthquake, the officials issued a Pacific-wide, e-mailed tsunami warning but realised that most potential victims were not among the centre's Pacific-nation clients, because the biggest impact would be in the Indian Ocean.

They knew disaster was approaching but also knew that the Indian Ocean, where tsunamis are extremely rare, has no ocean-wide tsunami detection system and no warning system.

Officials told the Honolulu Advertiser that they realised there was no way to alert potential victims because they did not know who to contact. Charles McCreery, director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Honolulu centre, said: "We tried to do what we could. We don't have contacts in our address book for anybody in that part of the world."

His colleague, Barry Hirshorn, said: "We talked to the State Department Operations Centre and to the military. We called embassies. We talked to the navy in Sri Lanka, any local government official we could get hold of."

Of course, we are no longer quite so primitive as to think, with the writers of the ancient scriptures, that natural calamities may be causally connected to human bad behaviour. If there are any loonies out there who think that Phuket is being punished for being the modern Nineveh, they have had the good sense to keep it to themselves. In this largely godless age, we have a more subtle interpretation of the relation between human excess and natural disaster. Our new high priests are the environmentalists, and when the icebergs calve early or the swallows fly the wrong way, it is they who cry woe and say that it is a judgement on us all and our wicked ways; and that is why, in the case of a colossal undersea earthquake, you can sense the silent frustration of the told-you-so scientists.

Whatever you say about the slipping of tectonic plates on the seabed off Sumatra, it had nothing to do with global warming. It was not caused by decadent use of deodorants or George W Bush or the flouting of the Kyoto Protocol. There may now be six billion of us crawling over the crust of the Earth, but when things move

Continued Page 9