

Psychosocial support after attacks



Vanessa Spiller, the British Red Cross Head of UK Emergency Planning, underlines the importance of swift psychosocial support – particularly following major traumatic events, such as the recent attacks in Mumbai



THE MUMBAI ATTACKS LEFT hundreds of people traumatised and reminded us of the need to ensure we can provide psychosocial support, including practical and emotional support, which is vital to individuals caught up in such terrible events.

Wherever disasters occur there are often, tragically, casualties, injuries and – at worst – loss of life. More often than not, these experiences can be difficult to come to terms with and can leave survivors with emotional memories, which can alter their lives.

In response to the recognised need to help survivors start to come to terms with these traumatic events, and following the devastating Asian Tsunami in 2004, the British Red Cross went into partnership with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to offer psychosocial support to individuals caught up in disasters abroad.

The partnership the Red Cross forged with the FCO is a commitment to provide psychosocial support to British citizens affected

Wherever disasters occur, there can often be residual trauma for survivors; the British Red Cross provides psychosocial support through a programme in partnership with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office

David Brewer / The Times

by disasters overseas, when requested by the FCO. The BRC Psychosocial Support Team (PST) will deploy as part of an FCO Rapid Deployment Team (RDT) to augment existing consular staff to offer practical and emotional support to survivors and bereaved relatives.

SWIFT DEPLOYMENT

In the case of the Mumbai incident, we had a team swiftly deployed to India within 24 hours to provide support to Britons affected by the attacks, because we knew that they were likely to need help, as were their relatives. The team was sent out to be on hand to respond to any requests to assist people through this extremely difficult time. Working with the Foreign Office, we were there to ensure that people received the support they needed. This involved assessing the needs of those

affected, including providing information of what to expect and how best to cope with such disasters. In addition, the PST also facilitated contact with other organisations that could help.

Members of the Red Cross PST are a mix of BRC volunteers, staff and specialists from health and psychology backgrounds, who dedicate their time and expertise to the service. In addition to BRC training, they are also engaged regularly in training programmes with FCO RDT in role-play exercises and case scenario drills, to equip them with skills in providing vital assistance in the event of major incidents such as floods or earthquakes, terrorist attacks and public emergencies like transport accidents and fires.

The PST has now supported Britons abroad on several occasions, such as after the triple bombings in Dahab, Egypt in 2006, the fatal plane crash in Phuket, Thailand in September 2007 and also to Brazzaville, Congo, to assist with the evacuation of British nationals in March 2007.

This important partnership between the FCO and the British Red Cross means that trained volunteers are on standby to offer practical help and emotional support to people affected by tragedies worldwide. This can involve everything from listening to people who are experiencing trauma, to letting survivors' relatives in the UK know that they are safe and well.

The British Red Cross helps people in crisis, whoever and wherever they are. We are part of a global voluntary network responding to conflicts, natural disasters and individual emergencies.

We enable vulnerable people in the UK and abroad to prepare for and withstand emergencies in their own communities. And when the crisis is over, we help them to recover and move on with their lives.

In the event that we raise more money than can be reasonably and efficiently spent, any surplus funds will be used to help us prepare for and respond to other humanitarian disasters either overseas or in the UK.

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Vanessa Spiller is the Head of the British Red Cross UK Emergency Planning. For more information on the work of the Red Cross visit: www.redcross.org.uk