

# Overseas assistance

The British Red Cross describes the facets of its international response operations and how it has been called upon to help in numerous high profile natural disasters in the Asia Pacific Region

## RED CROSS VOLUNTEER, ALFIYAH

**R**is only 25 yet she has already worked in three major disasters in her home country of Indonesia. Four years ago, Alfiyah teamed up with a group of volunteers when Indonesia was struck by the Boxing Day tsunami in 2005. She went on to help in the aftermath of the Yogyakarta earthquake in 2006 and recently, after the earthquake that shook the city of Padang on September 30.

The latest earthquake was yet another confirmation of how Indonesia is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. After the devastating earthquake in Padang that killed thousands, disaster management experts and emergency response organisations all rushed to take positions to alleviate the crisis.

Transport networks in Indonesia had broken down, communication lines were cut and most of the affected areas were inaccessible in the wake of the disaster.

The British Red Cross was swift in dispatching its Emergency Response Unit (ERU) led by construction and logistic expert Jamie Richardson. The team's line-up also consisted of finance specialist Paula Bray, warehouse and transport professional Peter Pierce, David Stevens, an air operations expert, and Communications officer Sharon Reader.

The ERU team was tasked with receiving aid cargo and ensuring that it was allocated effectively along the distribution stages to the affected people on the ground.

This co-ordination was essential, owing to the massive scale of the Red Cross relief operation, which has currently reached more than 6,000 families with essential items such as hygiene packs, tarpaulins, mosquito nets, blankets and shelter materials.

Also supporting the British Red Cross ERU team's efforts were hundreds of Indonesia Red Cross volunteers, including Alfiyah, who were involved in search and rescue operations and providing first aid. Assessment teams organised by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) using a chartered helicopter, undertook aerial missions to locate missing people and to find out the needs of survivors.



*Alfiyah, along with other Indonesia Red Cross volunteers, gathers information to aid the search and rescue team following the recent disastrous earthquake*

Alfiyah said: "We've had around 40 calls from outside west Sumatra from people who haven't been able to reach their relatives in Padang and Pariaman. People are scared, they don't know what's happened to their family – whether they have survived the earthquake or not."

Often when disasters of this magnitude happen, survivors are left traumatised by the effects of the crisis. In such circumstances, in addition to providing emergency relief, the



*Air operations expert David Stevens, and Communications officer Sharon Reader, survey the destruction caused at the scene of the earthquake. They are part of the Emergency Response Unit (ERU) of the Red Cross that was sent to Indonesia to distribute aid cargo to the affected people*

Red Cross also helps by providing emotional and psychosocial support to victims.

Communications officer, Sharon, who witnessed one of the sessions during her mission said: "I went to see a Red Cross psychosocial support counselling session for women in the village of Sikapak, north of Pariaman. Women have been hit particularly hard by the earthquake as they were the ones at home with the kids when it happened. At the community hall, as well as a chance to talk, they were given techniques for coping with stress and the opportunity for additional counselling."

While Indonesia was coming to terms with the earthquake disaster, Vietnam and the Philippines were also reeling from the devastating effects of Typhoon Ketsana which, between September 26 and September 29, tore through the two countries, leaving hundreds dead and affecting at least six million people. A few days later, the Philippines' woes worsened when another typhoon, Parma, swept through the country causing floods that left a trail of destruction.

## SUPPORTING

Elsewhere, a tsunami devastated islands in the region of Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga on September 29 claiming at least 169 lives and leaving an estimated 30,000 people affected. In one week the East Asia region had been struck by four separate natural disasters. Throughout the affected areas Red Cross volunteers sprang into action, often supporting evacuations before the disasters struck, and have been working tirelessly ever since, distributing thousands of household kits, including mosquito nets, blankets, water containers and kitchen sets.

"The fact that Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers are based in the communities, close to the people, makes it possible to mobilize emergency help immediately, and to respond to many large emergencies at the same time. Dedicated, trained, and prepared volunteers, supported by strong national societies are the key to our ability to be where we are needed, when we are needed," explains Alistair Henley, Director of the IFRC's office for Asia Pacific in Kuala Lumpur. **CRJ**

■ [www.redcross.org.uk/emergencyresponse](http://www.redcross.org.uk/emergencyresponse)