

India: A trusted first responder

Suchitra Dural New Delhi

When a giant wall of seawater swept across Chennai's Marina Beach on the morning of Dec. 26, 2004, washing away fisherfolk and a group of children playing cricket, little did the people there realize the entire region had been struck and, across the Bay of Bengal, local residents and foreign tourists on Thai and Indonesian beaches had also been swept away.

The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, caused by a 9.3 magnitude earthquake off the island of Sumatra in Indonesia, was a natural catastrophe of a magnitude not experienced by humanity

in recent times. It resulted in the deaths of almost a quarter of a million people and the displacement of almost 2 million in 14 countries of the Indo-Pacific.

It also marked a coming of age for the institutional capacity of India's Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief operations. The country dealt not only with death and destruction on its own mainland, particularly in the coastal states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, as well as major devastation in its island territories of Andaman and Nicobar; it also provided speedy assistance to neighboring countries in South and Southeast Asia, including Sri

Lanka, the Maldives, Thailand and Indonesia.

India simultaneously launched five HADR operations, two of them national and three international: Operation Madad for coastal southern India; Operation Sea Waves for Andaman and Nicobar; Operation Castor for the Maldives; Operation Rainbow for Sri Lanka; and Operation Gambhir for Indonesia. These operations involved India's three military forces and the country's coast guard. More than 40 ships, several transport aircraft and helicopters, and more than 20,000 military personnel were deployed.

The actions taken by India in response to the disaster led to its recognition as a credible first responder in the Indo-Pacific region. Soon after, the Indian parliament adopted the 2005 Disaster Management Act, which provided the legal and institutional framework for disaster preparedness, mitigation and response at the national, state and district levels, and established a dedicated National Disaster Response Force.

The 2004 Tsunami also prompted a coming together of the navies of four countries, Australia, India, Japan and the US, as they coordinated the delivery of humanitarian assistance in a collaborative effort that in 2007 formally evolved into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as "The Quad." Since then, India has responded to several major natural disasters, in both its immediate neighborhood and more distant lands.

Suchitra Dural is former ambassador of India to Thailand and former high commissioner of India to Kenya.



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