

**Thai Tsunami Victim Identification
Role of the Department of Forensic Medicine
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ABSTRACT

On December 26, 2004, after a 9.0 Richter scale earthquake occurred north of Sumatra Island, there was a huge tsunami which later struck many countries on the coast of the Indian Ocean, causing nearly 217,000 deaths including 5,395 victims killed in southern Thailand. This devastation exceeded the capability of national mass fatality response resources. The members of Forensic Medicine Department, Chiang Mai University (CMU) had joined this unprecedented operation during the early period of the incident. The CMU forensic team was mobilized to the affected area on the third day of the disaster and set up a temporary morgue for body examinations at Khao Lak. The team examined about 193 corpses during December 29-30, 2004. More than half of the victims were female. About one-third of the bodies were identified as Caucasians and another one-third as Mongoloids. The rest of the victims were could not be identified ethnically. Most of the bodies recovered at this point were already decomposed, making identification more difficult. Only 14 cases were released to their families during these two days and the other 12 cases were released later. The examination site was then closed due to unsecured work place at Khao Lak. From this experience, it is clear that the country as well as the local authorities need a national mass fatality response plan. As the leading university in this region, Chiang Mai University can play an important role to cooperate with the local authorities in creating this plan and facilitating the preparedness for this region.

Key words: Tsunami, Dead, Victim Identification

INTRODUCTION

On December 26, 2004, after a 9.0 Richter scale earthquake occurred north of Sumatra Island (Indian Ocean Earthquake, 2004), there was a huge tsunami which later struck many countries on the coast of the Indian Ocean, causing nearly 217,000 deaths and an estimated 125,000 injured (Tsunami Death Toll, 2005). The tsunami hit six provinces in southern Thailand. The height of the waves was about 4–10 meters (Earthquake and Tsunami, 2005). In Thailand, an estimated 8,500 victims were injured and 5,395 killed by the tsunami (Table 1) (News After Shock, 2004). The tsunami caused the largest number of deaths from a single