

Where Were you When...?

People normally remember the big happenings in their lives as well as big world news in categories, where were you when president Kennedy was shot or when the first plane crashed to the WTC twin towers in New York.

Unfortunately we experienced a similar situation during the Christmas holidays namely the earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean that affected not only the countries that were directly affected but the whole mankind.

By Prof. Dr-Ing. Holger Magel



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Nearly everybody was part of the catastrophe because we all know people who were spending their holidays or working in the region. This shared experience resulted in humanitarian help as never before. It is a human feature that it is much easier to help those who have suffered most if you are directly or indirectly involved in a disaster. Now some weeks after the disaster it is time to consider what should be done and what could have been done to avoid catastrophes like this in the future. It is clear that there is very little that man can do when nature takes over, but with modern technology, monitoring and early warning systems and new communication technology we should have been able to make more.

Contacts and Ideas

I have been emotionally affected by all contacts and ideas that have been distributed by the professionals after the disaster. There seems to be a real interest among surveyors, geodesists, geoinformation experts etc. to help overcome the situation. Many questions have been put to the International Federation of Surveyors and other NGOs about their role in helping to rebuild those countries affected by the tsunami and how



Banda Aceh flooding... (Image Courtesy DigitlGlobe).

to build monitoring systems to prevent such events from happening again in the future. Many experts have experienced the need for actual maps describing the affected areas after the disaster, a need to share satellite images and information databases. Also questions on how the property and cadastral systems can be re-established after such events are arising.

The suggestions include e.g. the idea whether there should be an international database of experts – both in land administration and for mapping and geoinformation topics. Several people from different countries have asked or promoted the idea of establishing an international association called “Surveyors without Frontiers” based on a similar and very successful initiative among doctors. This kind of organisation could help not only after natural disasters but also after man made conflicts. Naturally there are questions, whether there are enough experts that such an organisation would work effectively and whether there are enough experienced experts. In any case this is an interesting question to think about and discuss the social responsibility of an individual.

The second question that raises here is what are the roles of the different actors. It seems that after major catastrophes everyone is willing to help. There is quite large consensus that the operations should be lead by the United Nations. It is easy to support this proposal. However it seems that even within the UN there is competition between the different bodies and organisations. Would NGOs bring more speed and flexibility to the process in the starting phase? Could the professionals be involved in bringing different actors together? And are we able to inform and collect our experts to help when the need is most urgent?

Better Prepared?

Tsunami in Asia is only one example of the natural disasters that have occurred during the last years. It is unfortunately expected that there will be more in the future – especially caused by the quick climate change that is already a reality. Should we be better prepared to tackle with such issues? FIG has already in 2004 established its own working group on disaster and risk management. But

the question now is how could more experts in remote sensing, mapping and surveying collect their efforts in making a joint proposal to the United Nations on how to establish monitoring systems that will help in the future? Would the whole geoinformatics branch influence for example the World Summit on information society on Tunis, 2005 to take further steps in getting geoinformation available to everybody via internet and other modern technologies? I think that the answer is yes. As a first step the responsibilities is on us “the community of all surveyors, geodesists and geoinformation experts”. On occasion of the FIG WW 2005 and GSDI-conference in April in Cairo I was asked to chair the annual meeting of the joint board of Geospatial Information Societies which will be attended by all presidents of IAG, ICA, ISPRS, IHO etc. I intend to discuss with them our common responsibilities in terms of impact of tsunamis and other catastrophes. ■