

## **The Tsunami and the Nicobar Islands – an update**

The total death-toll from the Asian tsunami exceeds 150,000. More than 10,000 of these are from India, and well over 5,000 people are still unaccounted for in the (Indian) Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Assuming most of the missing to have been drowned, their number, as a proportion of the islands' population, represents one of the greatest disasters of the entire region.

Both tribal and non-tribal peoples of the Nicobars have shown great resilience since the tsunami first struck on 26 December. Reports of tribal groups using their special knowledge of the local environment to take precautions and aid survival have been widely publicized.

In one positive development, a detailed survey has been commissioned by the Lt. Governor on behalf of the islands' administration for rehabilitation planning among the tribal Nicobarese. This is currently being carried out (as of mid-February) by a consortium of Tribal Councils, the Nicobar Youth Association, and the Society for Andaman and Nicobar Ecology (SANE, a well-established Non-Governmental Organisation). Dr Simron Jit Singh from the University of Klagenfurt (Austria), who generously helped the British Museum prepare the Nicobar case-study in its Wellcome Trust Gallery, is helping co-ordinate this important initiative.

The following is extracted from a press release issued by SANE on 23 January:

[the indigenous population] have [...] started rebuilding [...] For example, instead of just waiting for the relief materials, the [Andamanese] Onges have resumed their hunting and the Nicobarese are engaged in replanting their horticultural gardens. This perhaps indicates a unique worldview of these indigenous communities in which their understanding of life and death is derived from their lived-in observation of chaos and disorder in nature. This perspective on their natural environment is also evident in the oral narratives and mythologies of Andamanese and Nicobarese indigenous communities.

Following the Tsunami disaster [...] the administration has taken first positive steps by acknowledging the wisdom of the local communities, the resourcefulness and experience of local NGOs and accepting inputs of scientists who have been working in the area for several years.

This process would involve eliciting [the] community's perception in rebuilding the community with cultural sensitivity and minimum imposition but maximum appropriate assistance.

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