

The British Museum and the Asian tsunami

Worst affected by the terrible earthquake/tsunami of 26 December 2004 are island and coastal communities in and around the Bay of Bengal in the eastern Indian Ocean. Understandably enough, tourist locations such as Phuket in southern Thailand were the first focus for international media reports, but as everyone now knows, many thousands more people throughout the region have lost their lives, and the survivors their families, homes and/or livelihoods. How many have perished, the degree of infrastructural damage, and the prospect of improved warning systems in future, remain uncertain. What is clear, however, is that the rehabilitation of survivors and the reconstruction of communities will take time, resources and sensitivity to the complex ways of life and social values of the peoples concerned. Despite errors and setbacks, the humanitarian response seems to be rising to the immediate challenge. Nations and agencies are now working together with the generous support of people and organisations from all over the world.

For millions outside the affected region, reports of the disaster have suddenly brought unfamiliar places and peoples into their living rooms. The British Museum is dedicated to 'showing the world to the world' and has long exhibited some wonderful objects from South and Southeast Asia in its galleries, but mainly from inland sites or areas unaffected by the recent disaster. The outstanding exception is the display of figurative sculpture and other remarkable material from the Nicobar Islands, long used by local people to 'manage' the world of spirits, and which can be seen in the 'Living and Dying' exhibition in the Wellcome Trust Gallery, which opened in 2001. The Nicobars are close to the epicentre of the recent earthquake and appear to have suffered severe damage and loss of life, although current estimates of this remain uncertain. We remain in close touch with colleagues with whom we have collaborated on this exhibition and expect the situation in the Nicobar Islands will become clearer in the next few days.

Besides that available in the gallery, information about the Nicobar Islands (which are part of India), and other countries of the region, can be accessed by visitors to the Centre of Anthropology, near the North entrance, where a range of relevant books and journals can be consulted. For opening hours, see elsewhere on this website.

How the Nicobarese people are dealing with the disaster will be reported or referenced here when details become available. In the meantime, donations to the general relief effort in the region affected can be made via

www.ifrc.org [International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies]

www.tsunami-relief.org

www.savethechildren.org.uk

www.unicef.org.uk/emergency or tel. 08457-312-312

www.christianaid.org.uk

<http://www.andaman-nicobar-fund.org>