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**Rising from the Wreckage:**

**Development of Tsunami affected Libraries in Sri Lanka**

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Ms Kay Rasaroka, President, IFLA; Professor Peter Lor, Secretary General, IFLA; Members of the Executive Council; Fellow Librarians; Ladies and Gentlemen;

At the outset let me mention that it is indeed a great honour for my country, Sri Lanka and me personally to have been invited by the President and the Secretary General of IFLA to be a plenary speaker at the World Library and Information Congress in Oslo, Norway. I take this opportunity to thank the President and Executive Committee of IFLA for this rare privilege bestowed upon me. I must also thank the members of this august assembly, leaders and trail blazers in the library and information field for being here with us in this beautiful Nordic city of Oslo when we share our knowledge and experience in the belief that it would lead to greater understanding and co-operation among those engaged in the field of librarianship.

First of all I must apologise to the distinguished audience for speaking about a tragedy at the first session of this mega conference, immediately following the magnificent opening ceremony, which was attended by Norway's royalty. On a more positive note this particular tragedy is now an event of the past and I believe that many lessons can be learnt from it. It is somewhat fortunate that throughout history large-scale library tragedies have been rare and far between, even though library catastrophes have occurred from Alexandria to Iraq, for reasons ranging from earthquakes to floods and from simple arson to aerial bombing. Every

library disaster like any other human experience enriches us with its own unique lessons and this too is no exception.

## **Theme**

I have been requested to speak on the destruction of libraries due to the tsunami tidal waves that lashed the shores of the Indian Ocean countries on 26 December 2004 with special emphasis on Sri Lanka. I believe the tsunami became a much talked of event due to the huge destruction it left, and affected countries are still struggling to cope with its aftermath. If we look at the incidents of 9/11 as a comparison to the tsunami of 26/12, I would say that the 3,000 lives lost in 9/11 and the 230,000 lives lost in 26/12 amply summarises the virulent nature of the tsunami story.

On the other hand while in the middle of destruction, planning for rehabilitation and reconstruction, negotiating with varied parties and planning for the future, I realise how close we are to the 'lifelong literacy' theme selected by our Madam President and how crucial and decisive this theme is for meaningful reconstruction/development programmes in a situation such as a tsunami. Her vision on the path towards information society through skilfully harnessing technology, development skills, provision of content, support for the marginalized and protection of indigenous knowledge systems are also the main ingredients for a successful and professional recovery programme.

At this point I wish to remind the distinguished audience that Sri Lanka has been hailed as an example to the developing world for its vast developments in the education and health sectors during the last 50 years. Our social indicators of life expectancy, literacy and mortality rates compare well with those in comparable developing countries and are even on par with many developed countries. Through free and compulsory education policies implemented in the 1940s, 98% of Sri Lankans have access to primary education and the literacy rate has been a constant 95%+ during the last few decades. In the health sector too we are among the best having one of the lowest infant mortality rates and high life expectancy.

Even though there are many aspects I could speak on in relation to the topic assigned to me, considering the time allocated, I will limit my presentation to four areas namely, what exactly happened, the devastation caused to libraries, rebuilding efforts and lessons to be learnt.

## **What Exactly Happened**

At 0758 hrs local time on 26 December 2004 the earth's crust deep under the sea off the west coast of Sumatra, shifted violently lifting the seabed by some 15 meters. The seismic thrust, the world's biggest in 40 years measuring more than 9.0 on the Richter scale, sent shockwaves through the Indian Ocean, unleashing tsunami tidal waves speeding at up to 700 kilometres per hour in every direction. The vast curtain of water roared across the ocean like a proverbial sea dragon or as fast as a jet plane. It took only 20 minutes to hit Aceh province in Indonesia, 80 minutes to reach Thailand and 90 minutes to reach Sri Lanka and India. Within a few hours it caused colossal destruction in a number of countries in Asia, namely, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, Maldives and Bangladesh. The waves then travelled as far as East Africa affecting Somalia, Tanzania and Kenya as well.

## **Tsunami and Sri Lanka**

It is generally believed that the Indian Ocean is a tsunami free zone as no significant tsunami has occurred in the area during the past few centuries. As a result the region had not established a tsunami pre-warning system similar to the one in the Pacific Ocean. Even the word tsunami was an alien term to Sri Lanka and many other countries in South Asia until December 2004.

### **Damage to Infrastructure**

Sri Lanka being an island situated facing the epicentre of the quake paid a high price in terms of destruction to human lives as well as infrastructure and natural resources. 60% of the coastal area was severely affected destroying or damaging 80,000 houses. A total of 182 schools were damaged and government took over 282 schools to be used as relief camps for internally displaced persons. Four universities were partially damaged, as were three advanced technical training institutes and ten vocational training institutes. Damage to roads, railways, telecommunication facilities, electricity supply, tourist and fishing industry is quite significant. In addition the damage to sand dunes, lagoons and coastal vegetation has resulted in untold environmental destruction.

The public sector not only suffered loss to human lives and infrastructure facilities but also had to contend with the loss of many valuable and vital records and documents pertaining to the public. These included the entire electoral registers in the Southern province and 600,000 deeds from the Surveyor General's Department. Private citizens lost valuable documents, e.g. legal documents pertaining to land and building, identification papers, bank documents and education, birth, marriage and death certificates.

The loss of assets and damage to infrastructure facilities in Sri Lanka is estimated at US\$1,000 million or 5 percent of GDP while the loss of employment is estimated at 275,000.

### **Two Catastrophes**

As you may be aware for over two decades Sri Lanka has been suffering from an internal conflict. As a result of this conflict, there is a de facto government in one part of the north and east administered by the LTTE, which is the other party to the conflict. Although a ceasefire agreement has been in operation during the last three years it is an uneasy truce. Not only has this war taken over 65,000 lives, a large number of people have been displaced and to date live in relief camps. Thus the tsunami brought further misery to some people who had already suffered from the conflict.

### **Damage to the Library Sector**

#### **Schools**

The tsunami hit the coastal areas in Sri Lanka on a Sunday and obviously this helped to save the lives of thousands of school children and teachers. Had it been a normal school day the consequences would have been unimaginable as large numbers of children from interior villages in close proximity also attend these schools.

Of the 9,790 schools in the country nearly 500 schools were affected by the tsunami. A total of 3,304 teachers and 80,354 children have been affected. Although all of the damaged schools did not have fully fledged school libraries, most of them had medium sized reasonably good libraries and others had book cupboards or book boxes.

It is estimated that approximately 1.2 million volumes of books and other reading material in school libraries were lost due to the tsunami. It is not possible to determine the exact quantum of library books and other material lost as accession registers and library card catalogues have also been destroyed. In addition a large collection of textbooks, which were intended for distribution among school children at the beginning of the new academic year in January were also destroyed. As part of its welfare facilities Sri Lanka provides free textbooks to every school going child from grade 1 to grade 10. Destroyed library material include books, periodicals, newspapers, audio-visual material and in some schools computers, diskettes etc. Some of the affected school libraries had been assisted by the recently concluded school library development and modernisation project carried out by the government in collaboration with a multi-national aid agency.

### **Public libraries**

Of the 950 public libraries, 62 have been affected by the tsunami with 28 libraries being completely destroyed. After the establishment of the first public library in 1825, Sri Lanka has developed a reasonably good public library network over the years. Early introduction of adult universal franchise (1933), establishment of a parliament democracy, people's participation in administration at every level, high literacy rate (95%), free and compulsory education and the establishment of the National Library and Documentation Services Board (NLDSB) (1970) have helped in the development of the public library service in the country.

While developing the standard public library service, attention has been paid to develop special collections in public libraries that are beneficial to economic activities of different areas. Accordingly special collections on tourism, fisheries, traditional handicrafts, jewellery making, coir industry, ornamental fish farming, spice growing and processing, etc. have been developed by some public libraries located in the coastal zone.

### **Effect on Local Collections of Libraries**

Being an important centre of the sea trade in the ancient silk route, throughout history Sri Lanka has had a close relationship with the other sea faring nations. The coastal area of Sri Lanka has a number of small ports that were busy trading centres for spices, gems, pearls and other exotic products. As a result this area developed strong cultural ties with Chinese, Indonesians, Thais, Malays, Indians, nationalities from the Middle East and East Africa and more recently with the Portuguese, Dutch and English. Today one can identify traces of communities from these nations scattered along the coast of the country. More importantly as result of this interaction with other nationals the coastal area enjoys a unique cultural heritage, which librarians make an attempt to save through local collections in the respective libraries. One can find different customs, food, theatre, cultural activities, vocabulary, specialised crafts and other industries in these areas depicting their uniqueness. These local collections would have been a happy hunting ground for future anthropologists and other researchers to study the consequences of rare interactions of different nationalities in the bygone era.

## **Other Types of Libraries**

Some of the libraries attached to Buddhist temples had very valuable collections comprising of palm leaf manuscript collections and other rare materials including material on the indigenous medicine system referred as Ayurvedha. Special mention must be made of the loss to a collection of priceless artefacts from the Sri Lanka Maritime Museum in the southern city of Galle. Galle, located on the ancient sea route, is rich ground for marine archaeological exploration. Sir Arthur C Clarke, who is residing in Sri Lanka started under water exploration in Sri Lanka about four decades ago. From the collection of 3,600 objects salvaged from ancient shipwrecks during the last decade, 80% was re-taken by the ocean in the wake of the tsunami.

## **Nature of the damage**

According to eyewitness accounts two powerful waves hit the shore within the space of a few minutes. The velocity was such that it either levelled the buildings to the ground or severely damaged them. The buildings that were able to withstand the power of the first wave were destroyed by the second wave, which was more powerful than the initial one.

Another feature of the tsunami was the inward and outward waves created by it. The gush of water that came from the ocean rolled back to the sea at such a force creating an inward wave from the land to the ocean. This retreating water not only caused damage to already weakened structures but also took away books and other items to the ocean. The fishermen who were coming back from the sea that day reported seeing massive amounts of floating bodies, furniture and other debris in the sea.

## **Conservation challenges posed by tsunami**

The other special feature of the tsunami is the difficulty of conservation and preservation of damaged library materials. Due to the disruption of the seabed the water was mixed with mud, sand and probably even minerals along with other substances. Tests carried out at the conservation laboratory of the National Archives of Sri Lanka reveal that these papers consist of more acidic components than normal seawater affected papers. Hence it is necessary to study this uncharted area further and find special treatment for tsunami-affected material.

## **Psychological Trauma**

The number dead and missing in Sri Lanka is 36,000. One third of the dead are children and the percentage of dead women is much higher than their male counterparts. The tsunami orphaned a total of 1,070 children and 3,700 lost either their mother or their father. The loss of dwellings, properties and the social fabric of the community further worsened the situation. Most of the survivors faced near death experiences, which will most likely haunt them throughout their lives.

## **Trauma of librarians**

The loss of libraries, library collections, known library users and sometime even their own relatives and friends created a deep psychological impact in the minds of librarians in affected libraries. Some had to find a temporary location and commence services from scratch, while others were required to get the damaged building repaired and restore damaged collections

and furniture and equipment. Since library authorities such as schools and local councils were reeling with numerous problems also caused by the tsunami, librarians faced an extremely gruelling time when restoring services. Even the rescued library material caused health hazards to both users and librarians and became an additional burden.

### **SL DMC for LISA**

Immediately following the disaster the National Library sent a SOS to the international community outlining the general nature and details of the destruction. The excellent coverage Sri Lanka and the tsunami disaster received from the world media eased our task. This prompted UNESCO to send an official from the New Delhi office to assess the situation in Sri Lanka. Thus Dr Ms Susanne Ornager, Information and Communication Expert of UNESCO visited Sri Lanka in early January and toured the southern coast with a view to assessing the destruction.

During her visit the Sri Lanka Disaster Management Committee for Library, Information Services and Archives (SL DMC for LISA) was formed to co-ordinate activities of the tsunami affected libraries and government archival materials in the country. The DMC incorporated all major stakeholders of the library and archival fields including the National Library and Documentation Services Board, National Library, National Archives, Sri Lanka Library Association, National Science Foundation, major library training institutes and the relevant ministries. The NL assumed the role of chairing, co-ordinating and secretarial functions of the committee. Russell Bowden, former 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President of IFLA, who is currently residing in Sri Lanka, also played an important role in this endeavour.

### **Task forces**

A number of task forces have been set up to assist the DMC in the areas of *immediate relief, library furniture and building planning, ICT planning, education and training, conservation, selection of library material, school library development, public library development, general library sector and twinning*. Each task force consist of 8-12 members from library, IT, government and other relevant fields to advise and plan the assigned work. Through these task forces it has been able to ensure a wider participation of librarians and experts from relevant fields.

### **Interaction with others**

The National Library made a quick survey of affected libraries and published details on the web, which is constantly updated with new information. This together with photographs, reports and comments from visitors to the scene, help to keep the world community, specially the global library community informed of the unfolding disaster in the library field. This is in contrast to the traditional pattern of getting to know details of disasters after the lapse of a considerable period of time.

### **Community involvement**

The National Library is in constant touch with the grass root level in planning and reconstruction of libraries and has invited all library committees, readers' circles and other groups attached to libraries to be involved in this process. Where library committees are non-operational, librarians and library authorities are instructed to establish such committees on a

priority basis. Some libraries have reported that formation of new library committees was necessitated due to some members of the previous committees perishing in the tsunami. The National Library and the DMC conducted a number of seminars with relevant officials, librarians and others to plan remedial measures.

Today, seven months after the tsunami, Sri Lanka is in the midst of the reconstruction phase. According to experts and numerous studies done on the reconstruction it is envisaged that it will take at least a minimum of three to five years (if not more) to recover from the disaster.

### **Welfare of Children**

Welfare of the tsunami-affected children has become a major social issue and the government had to introduce special legislation to deal with the situation. The Tsunami (Special Provision) Act No. 16 of 2005 of June 2005 made special provision with regard to the care and custody of children and young persons who have been orphaned or left with a single parent. The National Child Protection Authority is the guardian of such children even though they may be in the custody of foster parents or in an institution.

### **Assistance Received**

#### **Response of the international community**

The response of the International community to the tsunami disaster is heart warming. From UN agencies down to school children from distant countries there was an instant response to the tragedy faced by fellow human beings. The UN organised a tsunami development forum and assistance amounting to US\$3.2 billion was pledged for Sri Lanka. President Bill Clinton has been appointed as the UN goodwill ambassador to co-ordinate the tsunami relief efforts in the region.

Large sums of assistance have been received by non-governmental organisations to undertake relief and rehabilitation work. The general distrust towards helping governments has led to the proliferation of NGOs in the aftermath of the tragedy. Frequently government machinery has been considered inefficient, bureaucratic, corrupt and non-people friendly. Although these are not necessarily true in the Sri Lankan context, the general opinion prevails.

#### **Response to the library appeal**

By end July 2005 total assistance received or pledged amounted to US\$1,000,000, details of which are posted on our website. About US\$25,000 was received from the library field and individual donors. Here I must specially acknowledge the generous support we received from the Korean Library Association; Hungarian Library Association; the National Library for the Blind, UK; Weld Library District, Colorado, USA and Victoria University Library, Melbourne, Australia. The rest came from UNESCO, Australian Red Cross, Book Aid International and a few other non-governmental organisations. We are aware that most of the countries provided or pledged funds or other forms of assistance towards the government of Sri Lanka and therefore, it is unlikely that special funding would be made towards the library fund.

## **Assistance from UNESCO**

Through its office in New Delhi, UNESCO has been involved in library rebuilding and rehabilitation activities from the inception. In April 2005 UNESCO managed to allocate US\$100,000 from the Information For All Programme (IFAP) to meet some of the immediate needs of affected libraries based on a project formulated by the DMC. In addition to Ms Ornager, Mr Martin Hadlow, who headed the UNESCO temporary office in Colombo for a short period, and Mr Abdualaziz Abid of Information for All Programme helped us in numerous ways.

## **Immediate Relief Activities Undertaken**

### **Provision of book boxes**

The National Library provides reading material in a lockable box and with instructions on how to operate a basic lending service. These book boxes are given to co-ordinators of camps/transitional housing schemes and persons to function as librarians are selected from among the inhabitants.

### **Provision of books and other reading material**

The National Library and other organisations have been successful in supplying a large stock of books and other reading material to libraries as well as refugee camps. Though many offers of books have been received, the bulk is either used or weeded out material of other libraries. Some of this material is unsuitable for small school or public libraries and hence, offers have had to be refused. Since most of these libraries are relatively small ones, it is virtually impossible to store unwanted or rarely used material sacrificing valuable space.

### **Supply of furniture and equipment**

As pointed out earlier in this paper, vast amounts of library furniture were lost due to tsunami and these items are in great demand from all types of libraries. Apart from losing furniture due to the collapse of library buildings, being washed away by the waves and theft and vandalism after the incident, instances of refugees using school furniture as firewood has also come to light. During the past seven months the National Library managed to provide basic library furniture such as reading tables, chairs, book cupboards and book racks to a number of libraries, helping these institutions to restart basic services. Rs7 million which equals US\$70,000, worth of library furniture has already been ordered for the second phase of distribution.

### **Publication programme**

A number of programmes have been initiated with the aim of publishing books suitable for tsunami-affected children. Recently, the National Library launched a programme titled Tsunami Children's Book Project to publish fifteen high quality children's books (seven in Sinhala, five in Tamil and three in English) and authors have been requested to submit suitable manuscripts for consideration for assistance. The objective is to produce high quality children's books on themes such as courage, determination and overcoming life's obstacles. Already a large number of manuscripts have been received and it is hoped to publish the selected ones during the National Reading Month in October.



## **2005 National Reading Month Campaign**

Sri Lanka declared the month of October as the National Reading Month in 2004 and this year special attention will be paid to the tsunami affected areas during the National Reading Month campaign. The theme for 2005 is 'Nation Building through Reading', and announcements have already been made for national and school level competitions for posters, photographs and essays on the theme.

## **Long Term Library Development**

### **Rebuilding school libraries**

Rebuilding affected schools and school libraries have been undertaken by various national and international organisations and 163 memorandums of understanding have already been signed between the government and donor agencies. According to the blue print developed by the Ministry of Education, the minimum cost per school is approximately Rs40 million (US\$400,000) and includes science laboratories, a multi-media unit, a fully fledged computer learning centre, a large library and a gymnasium.

### **Rebuilding of Public Libraries**

Compared to the school sector the Local Government Sector is somewhat slow in reconstruction activities. While a number of new cities and towns have been planned in the area with the necessary infrastructure facilities, problems in funding and the non-availability of land have made the progress rather slow. This has directly affected the rebuilding of public libraries as well.

### **Library building plans**

The National Library and the Disaster Management Committee are eager to develop new library building designs that are economical, attractive and functional. Some librarians are canvassing for tsunami resistant library buildings; e.g. buildings on pillars. Already designs of buildings in coastal areas have begun changing taking into consideration the effects of the tsunami.

The concept of developing special plastic containers to store valuable library material is also being discussed. UNESCO has promised to provide the services of an expert in library building to assist us and we have also commissioned local architects to address these issues and come up with new library designs.

### **Twinning**

With a view to ensuring the long-term sustainability it is intended to twin each affected library with two other libraries. The ideal would be to twin an affected library with one overseas library and one local library. We hope that this new triangular model of twinning will lead to close cooperation of libraries at global level. The two supporting libraries are required to provide professional, material, monitoring and general assistance in any possible form within their existing capability.

## **Challenges and Lessons to be Learn**

### **Rebuilding the social fabric**

The repair and rebuilding of the village based social fabric in the coastal zone of Sri Lanka has become the principal challenge at present. People who have been bound together for centuries by family relationships, economic activities and social status have suddenly found that everything has disintegrated and are forced to live in different locations with different people in different surroundings. To these people who have lost their self worth and self-esteem it is important that relocation is undertaken with minimum disruption to the social fabric.

### **Keep libraries on the agenda**

In the post-tsunami era the primary concentration of the government, international organisations, NGOs and others has been on the immediate needs of the people and in infrastructure development. Hence, as both the government and NGOs have constantly reminded us, library development and reconstruction cannot be considered a priority. With in this environment it is a continuous struggle for national library and the DMC to include library reconstruction in to the bigger picture.

### **Disaster plan for libraries**

A need for an effective national disaster preparedness plan for libraries has been clearly shown by the tsunami disaster. We have individual disaster plans for some major libraries in the country but not a national plan. This will be a priority in our activities in the coming months.

### **Need for a rapid response team**

Need for a rapid response team similar to the Red Cross, UNHCR and UNICEF should be seriously considered by UNESCO and to some extent by IFLA to face similar disaster situations in the future. We have witnessed the serious effects to the cultural properties including libraries in a number of disasters in the last two decades especially in developing countries. The Rapid Response Team, with adequate resources should be able to visit the country at the very initial stage, similar to the above-mentioned organisations and team up with the local librarians, archivists, archaeologists and others to face the emergency. Such a team could identify vulnerable resources, assess the damage and take remedial action. This will be more beneficial rather than long-term assistance in such a situation.

## **Conclusion**

As I mentioned at the outset large scale library tragedies are rare and far between. In my paper I recounted the events that occurred in my country, Sri Lanka, and I am certain that my colleagues from Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, India, Maldives and Bangladesh too have their own stories to tell. While thanking those who have helped us in this hour of need, I must stress that still there are plenty of opportunities for others to join in this historical library rebuilding effort. A special word of appreciation should be recorded to my Sri Lankan library colleagues who are shouldering a difficult task against many odds. I am confident that with our unshakable determination to overcome this terrible tragedy and move forward once again

with your blessings we will prevail and go on to achieve much more than the sea took away from us on that fateful day in 2004.

**Thank You.**

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