

CATASTROPHE IN ASIA

Hands-on with tsunami disaster

Bay Area volunteers heading for Asia in the hope of helping

[Vanessa Hua, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Soon after Raj Rajagopal learned of the tsunami that devastated his homeland of Sri Lanka, he started packing.

When the software consultant returns there today, he'll take along his mosquito net, anti-itch cream and rain gear. He'll stuff a suitcase or two with antibiotics, oral dehydration formula, baby formula and other donated medical supplies.

Rajagopal, 34, of Sunnyvale, wanted to go sooner but was busy coordinating local fund raising and other relief efforts.



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Like Rajagopal, dozens of people from the Bay Area are headed to southern Asia. Others who were vacationing in the region over the holidays have stayed on to help.

"We're not doctors, but we hope to be useful," Rajagopal said. "There's a need for people who can organize and speak English."

He and his friends Thasam Gunanayagam and Shan Sundar were gathered in his Sunnyvale living room, which has been turned into a makeshift command center with two maps of Sri Lanka, a computer, a printer and a plywood desk. His friends plan to return to the island nation by the end of January and stay for a couple of months.

Both Doctors Without Borders and the Red Cross have been flooded with applications from volunteers but are very selective when choosing people to deploy.

Volunteers who can help the most are those who are fluent in the languages of the area and have prior disaster relief experience or knowledge in technical fields such as medicine, logistics, and water and sanitation engineering, relief experts say.

Many would-be volunteers without such skills should stay home and donate instead, they say.

"Resources on the ground are fairly limited, and food, shelter and water need to be dedicated to the people who need it most," said Suzanne Brooks, executive director of the Center for International Disaster Information.

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Still, people such as Jeff Pan -- a New Yorker who plugged into San Francisco-based online community, Craigslist -- are not content to just send donations. After putting a call out for others who wanted to help rebuild the devastated areas of south Asia, the United Volunteers was born.

Pan says he wanted to fly back to help and was frustrated that no relief organizations wanted his assistance.

The new organization's first group of about a dozen volunteers is scheduled to arrive in Thailand on Sunday and will work with a local relief agency rebuilding housing on the tourist island of Phuket. More than 500 people, many from the Bay Area, have inquired about volunteering.

United Volunteers co-founder Shelly Chambers, 38, of Santa Cruz, is quitting her job today and flying to Bangkok tonight.

"I'm really excited when I get up in the morning to work," Chambers said. "But every business has an opportunity to fail. This one has roadblocks and tribulations -- we're not kidding ourselves."

Dara Zimmerman, a San Francisco paint contractor, left for Sri Lanka with Global Crossroad, a for-profit outfit that arranges volunteer opportunities for a fee. The project is for two weeks, but she plans to stay for two months. She wants to help build emergency housing and set up radio stations.

"I would see more buildings being built than if I were just sending money," said Zimmerman, 23.

Other Bay Area volunteers are returning to help their homeland.

Baskaran Tranquebar, 37, left Dublin for the hard-hit southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu last week. The Hindu Community and Cultural Center in Livermore has raised more than \$40,000, some of which Tranquebar will spend on immediate needs, with the rest set aside for long-term reconstruction.

In his two weeks there, Tranquebar is working with local relief agencies to buy and assemble ration kits that contain clothes, gas, utensils, basic medicine, chlorination tables, rice and grains. He will also provide shelters, portable toilets and community kitchens.

"You see the daily suffering they go through. You don't feel like sitting here comfortably," said the software professional, who paid his own way to India.

Sextus Selvaratnam, 42, of Capitola was visiting family and friends in Sri Lanka when the tsunami struck. Now, the assistant manager at Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk and his wife are helping a small village on the east coast near Batticaloa. The village had a population of 1,200, but many were killed.

He will return to the United States next week but plans to go back to Sri Lanka. "The reason we took this village is it is small and we can help make a difference in their lives," he wrote in an e-mail.

The Tamil Rehabilitation Organization, and the Tamils of Northern California, have raised about \$70,000 in tsunami aid for the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka.

In 1983, civil war erupted between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil separatists, a conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives. In 2002, the country took steps toward peace.

Gunanayagam had already planned to return to Sri Lanka for a few months

to teach, but now he says he will do whatever is needed.

"Because of the conflict, my minority community has suffered a lot," said Gunanayagam, 55, a San Jose financial analyst. "It is my duty to help."

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