

'We will take them home':

At a temple in Thailand, volunteers from many walks of life take on the grim task of identifying tsunami victims

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Takua Pa, Thailand — A kaleidoscope of humanity passes through the flame-shaped gateway of Buddhist temple Wat Yan Yao.

Blond and dark, European and Asian, speaking at least 10 languages, they boast dozens of skills: physicians, dentists, X-ray technicians, computer geeks and cooks.

They have one focus: the 30 dingy, refrigerated shipping containers whose muted mechanical hum fills the temple grounds. Within those containers lie the remains of more than 2,300 unidentified victims of the Dec. 26 tsunamis.

And they have one goal, scrawled in Thai and English on the back of their T-shirts: "We will take them home."

Wat Yan Yao is a confection of blue and red tracery and smooth white plaster, the most imposing temple in the main town of Pang-nga, Thailand's worst-hit province. In the days after the tsunamis, its orange-robed monks agreed to allow victims' corpses to be stored there.

A few had travel documents in their pockets or name tags on their clothing, but most yielded no clues to their identities. The bodies had been soaked, battered and exposed to brutal sunlight; by the time they were taken to the temple, age, race and even gender were difficult to distinguish.

Photographs of the dead hang on 77 rough plywood boards along the main road outside the temple, under awnings that protect the images from the sun. More than 10,000 photographs, several for each body, have been placed there in hopes a family member can identify someone, but the images make it clear how vain that hope has become.

Identifying them requires sophisticated tools: fingerprints, dental records and DNA to match against samples from family members. Forensic teams from 31 countries arrived to help. Against the pale temple walls their uniforms make a patchwork of muted color: blue and green surgical scrubs on the Belgian team, black shirts on the Australians, khaki shorts and white T-shirts on the French.

The international identification effort reflects the diversity of the victims, who were among thousands of tourists drawn to the balmy Thai beaches over the Christmas holidays.

Most of the dead tourists' survivors have returned home; some Thai victims' relatives gather in a tent outside the temple. After scouring the outside wall of photographs, they pore over digital images on computers, trying to identify their loved ones. Initially chaotic, the identification effort has evolved into an efficient process. Bodies are examined for birthmarks and tattoos. Skin from fingertips is peeled off to make fingerprints. Teeth are examined and X-rayed, and teeth and sections of bone are pulled and cut for DNA. That information is loaded into a microchip the size of a grain of rice, then placed into a cheekbone cavity, so the corpse can be identified again.

Details are sent by e-mail to a giant database at a computer center on the island of Phuket. Then teenage Thai army cadets in white protective coveralls and respirators trundle the bodies back to the containers in handmade metal carts.

Each container holds dozens of bodies. When the container doors clank open, an unmistakable smell --- sweet, putrid and clinging --- drifts over the temple grounds.

"It is not that hard to take, not for a specialist," said French police commander Gerard de Lassus of the Identification de Victimes de Catastrophes. "It is unfortunately necessary to the job we do."

### Segregated efforts

Disputes over the identification process began almost as soon as the forensic effort did.

Bodies brought to the temple were segregated, Thai from foreign, first by sight and later by such anthropological criteria as skull shape and facial structure. That sparked concerns that other Asians could have been misidentified.

Those fears grew when the Thai government decided to identify its own citizens using Thai volunteers. That ruling effectively created two mortuaries within the temple, one operated by Thais and the other by foreigners, each using different techniques.

At the center of the controversy is the colorful chief of the Thai identification effort: Khunying Pornthip Rojanasunand, deputy director of Thailand's Central Institute of Forensic Science, who works from a folding table draped with computer cables, between the ornate crematory and a temporary kitchen for the crews.

Pornthip --- "Khunying" is a title granted by the king --- is instantly recognizable: blade-thin, with multiple earrings and extravagantly spiked crimson hair.

She is adored by the Thai public --- the plywood wall that shields the refrigeration trailers from view is covered with sketches portraying her as a superhero --- and loathed by the Thai police, who have feuded with her in the media since the forensic effort began.

Seldom leaving the temple grounds, she sleeps in a camper on the other side of the wall from the corpses. Knowing her popularity, the foreign teams treat her with careful respect. The volunteers who carry bodies, develop X-rays and comfort relatives worship her.

"By competency, by knowledge, by passion, she is the leader of the whole operation," said Dr. Luba Matic, a Yugoslavian physician who lives in Thailand. "She motivates all of us."

Pornthip's prominence and the volunteers' loyalty have given her extraordinary influence over the politically delicate plans for the dead.

The Thai government plans to transfer the whole forensic effort to a new mortuary being built on Phuket, a two-hour drive south. But poor coastal villagers, who can't afford to travel, don't want their relatives' bodies moved so far away. Several thousand have rioted twice in front of the temple, blocking police and preventing government officials from reaching the site.

When Pornthip came out to plead with them, she climbed onto a car and promised that no Thai bodies would leave the site. The mobs broke up and went home. While the foreign tsunami dead await identification, they will rest in a broad open space between a stand of coconut palms and a field of bean plants at the north end of Phuket.

The land, called Mai Khao, was lent by another Buddhist monastery for the new mortuary donated by the Norwegian government and built by international volunteers. It will be run by Houston-based Kenyon International Emergency Services, specialists in recovering the dead of mass disasters.

Banners draped across nearby trees mark the site. "Death Bodys Center (Tsunami)" says one; another bears condolences in English and Thai from Coca-Cola bottlers of southwest Thailand.

Last week, the first trucks carrying the containers that hold the dead began moving slowly under police escort down the highway to Phuket.

Construction of the new mortuary, like the forensic effort, has drawn volunteers from around the world like Charlotte firefighter Rob Brisley, who cashed in his vacation to help.

"I came with a mission," he said. "Until everybody goes home. That's why we are here."

Teeth play crucial role

Dentists may be the hardest working specialists at Wat Yan Yao. Decay does more than ruin the bodies' appearance; it degrades DNA in the tissues, reducing the chance of making a match. Dental analysis can provide crucial details.

"Teeth are the only way to accurately age a body," said a white-bearded dental technician who gave his name only as "Sandy from Kansas."

"A child may be big for his age or small for his age, but his teeth will tell you exactly how old," he said.

Each body in the camp is examined and dental charts are marked for fillings, bridges, root canals and missing teeth. Then they are X-rayed.

Dr. Gib Suwannagate, a 34-year-old oral surgeon from the coastal village of Si Racha, has examined more than 1,300 bodies on the Thai side of the temple. Head of her hospital's dentistry department, she arrived at Wat Yan Yao four days after the disaster.

"We pull three teeth," she said in slow but grammatical English. "We try to choose teeth that have large amounts of pulp, to get the DNA. But it is difficult because so many teeth have been lost."

Suwannagate had never before done such work; in all of Thailand there are only two forensic dentists.

"When I first came, there were no containers. The bodies were laid out on the ground, with dry ice," she said. "The first day, I wore three masks."

She works even though she knows it may not help in naming the dead. In Thailand, she said, only big-city dentists keep detailed patient records, while many of the Thai dead

are believed to have been subsistence fishermen and service workers from the resorts. Of all the bodies she has examined, only 10 have been identified so far.

"I feel so sad when I work," she said. "I think, 'How can I help this person?' Because all of us want to take them home."

A team of three

Some of the workers left comfortable lives to help after the tsunamis hit.

Dave Fruitman, a lawyer from Canada, was backpacking in Cambodia when he heard of the destruction. Tony Cresswell, a builder from England, was hiking in Sumatra with his 18-year-old daughter. Paul Sanderson, a New Zealand potter who was an extra in "The Lord of the Rings," was enjoying the holidays with his wife and children when he felt an inexplicable pull to go to Thailand.

Now all three sit beneath a slender golden Buddha, scrubbing the rings, necklaces, watches and photographs retrieved from the hands and pockets of the dead. Sometimes the items are more upsetting than the bodies.

"I had a wedding ring yesterday," said Cresswell, a tall man with the crooning accent of England's far north. "It had two dates on it. I thought, 'Ah, it's the day they got engaged and the day they got married,' " he said.

"And the day they got married was Dec. 24, 2004."

Once the possessions are clean, they are photographed and coded, and then bagged with the dental charts and X-rays and the DNA test results. The photographs are mailed to the database along with as many details as the men can uncover: brands, stones, carat weights, hallmarks.

The details have helped identify one body. Sanderson, who calls his group the "No Stone Unturned" team, is pessimistic.

"I think when this is over there will be a pile of bodies that can't be identified," he said. "Maybe some people were here because they were hiding. Maybe some had an identity change, or a sex change. Maybe some were just loners, and their families don't know where they are."

Reconstructed faces

The volunteers keep seeking fresh ways to link the dead with their lost identities.

Three of them are trying to give back to the battered bodies the faces they had in life.

Matic, the Yugoslavian doctor, was an artist before he began medical training. He lifts a crushed face from its skull, looking for landmarks that tell him where the eyelids began and where the base of the nose should rest. Then he lays the tissue gently back over the bone, working it like artist's clay until it looks lifelike. He takes a digital photograph of the results.

The next step belongs to Pat Noinoum and David Gross, a nurse and former graphic designer from Los Angeles and a photographer from Turkey who brought their own high-powered laptops. They enhance the photographs, erasing lacerations, smoothing and lightening the blackened skin and adding back lost teeth and hair.

Recently, as Noinoum labored over an image of a young Asian woman with a pointed chin, another volunteer watched.

"I know that woman," she said. "I've seen her face already." The girl hunted down a photograph brought in by the woman's family. They matched.

The men were thrilled but immediately became discouraged. There are thousands of faces to reconstruct, and the volunteers cannot stay much longer.

"Imagine if instead of three there were 300 of us," Matic said. "Perhaps we could reconstruct the face of everyone for whom nothing else has worked. In Thailand, whole families were destroyed, so there is no one to give a DNA sample. But maybe there are still people who could recognize the dead."