

Four years on, Tsunami orphans still struggling

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Photos by Mark Thomas

Ranong, Thailand, October 2008 – Four years after the tsunami swept destruction across Thailand's Andaman coast, good times have returned to most of the resort areas hardest hit by the deadly sea surge. Tourism is booming along the coast, with new hotels, restaurants and shops filled with crowds of tanned vacationers.

But away from the white sand beaches and neon lights of the tourist strips, the tsunami continues to take its toll on the lives of children orphaned by the disaster. Many of these children are still struggling to cope with the damage done by the December 2004 tsunami and its aftermath and continue to face an uncertain future.

Official estimates released in February 2005 put the number of children who had lost one or both parents in the tsunami at 1,109. A UNICEF-supported survey carried out in 2007 by ChildTRAC, a local non-government organization, identified an additional 644 children in the six southern provinces who had been orphaned by the tsunami.

In addition, the ChildTRAC survey report said another 300 children who lost their parents in the tsunami are living in other provinces, bringing the total number of children orphaned by the disaster to an estimated 2,053.

The ChildTRAC report said the failure to register orphans immediately after the catastrophe, the use of different data collection criteria by government agencies, and a lack of proper coordination all contributed to inaccurate estimates in early 2005. It noted that while the Ministry of Education's data on orphans took into account only children who were in school, the Ministry of Public Health focused only on children younger than five years of age. The Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, however, was responsible for pulling the two data together.

Amanda Bissex, Chief of the Child Protection Section for UNICEF Thailand, said ChildTRAC's research shows "the importance of having a centralized registration system under the responsibility of one agency. Without such system, a large numbers of affected children are not registered, and the opportunity to plan for appropriate service delivery for them and provide them with follow-up support is missed."

Bissex said the orphans who were not registered missed out on the provision of key services and support, including education grants, professional assessments of the relatives they would be placed with and psychosocial support.

Kasidej Chantara, now 4, was one of the many children who were orphaned but not registered in the months following the tsunami. He was just two months old when the tsunami claimed the lives of both his mother and father. Soon after his parents' cremation, his aunt, Kalaya Chantara, went to ask the Provincial Social Development and Human Security Office and the Education Service Area Office in Ranong for assistance. She was told by both agencies to come back when Kasidej started school.



Early this year Kalaya went back to both offices since Kasidej was starting his first year in kindergarten, but she was told “the assistance money is all gone”.

“I was confused,” said Kalaya, who runs a small mom-and-pop shop out of a shop house in a crowded migrant fishing community in Ranong’s Muang District. “Many people came to our house and asked for stacks of documents. But we haven’t heard from anyone during the past three years.”

Kalaya is also raising Kasidej’s sister, Chanoknant, 6, and has the additional responsibility of caring for her aging parents. Sitting in the rundown shop, which is the family’s main source of income, and watching Kasidej and Chanoknant play together, Kalaya expressed concern over their future.

“Kasidej Chantara, 4, is one of the many children who missed out on the provision of key services and support. He was just two months old when the tsunami claimed the lives of both his mother and father”.

“At the very least, I want to get scholarship for his education, the same kind his sister received,” Kalaya said.

Kalaya said she has registered both children with the Provincial Social Development and Human Security Office and Education Service Area Office in Ranong but that the benefits, both emergency and education allowances, are provided only for Chanoknant.

“I don’t understand why and no one has been able to explain it to me,” Kalaya said.

The tsunami devastated more than 400 kilometres of coastline in the coastal provinces of Phuket, Phang Nga, Krabi, Ranong, Trang and Satun, killing nearly 8,500 people and destroying more than 150,000 livelihoods. The catastrophe led the Thai government and other organizations to provide billions of baht of aid into the area, including the establishment of funds for the orphans.

Follow-up assessments have found that the majority of tsunami orphans are living with close relatives in good homes and receive the care and attention they need. However, there are still orphans who experience material, emotional and other difficulties.

The education scholarships and other monetary assistance provided for the care of orphans has been crucial, but at times it has also led to new problems in their lives. Some relatives looking to benefit from the monetary assistance have squabbled over who should care for the orphans, resulting in the separation of siblings.

In some cases, family members may have been more interested in the money being provided for the orphans than in actually providing them with the best home.

“My aunt withdrew all money in our bank accounts,” said Suwaibah Manote, 15, referring to some 150,000 baht she and her younger sister received as monetary aid after their mother

was killed by the tsunami. “My aunt told us to sign the bank withdrawal papers so that she could pay for our school uniforms expense, but she took out all the money.”

Suwaibah said she and her sister were frequently separated from their father over the past four years, mainly because her mother’s relatives wanted to care for them due to the financial benefits. She has attended three different schools in the past four years.



“Suwaibah Manote, 15, who lost her mother in the tsunami, now shares a 10-square meter unfinished concrete-block house with her father and his new family in Ranong”.

Today, Suwaibah and her sister live with their father, stepmother and step sister in a one-room, unfinished concrete-block house in Ranong’s Muang district. The five family members share a space of no more than 10 square-metres.

“I hope we will have enough money to finish the house soon,” said Suwaibah, whose beautiful smile fails to mask the deep sadness in her eyes. “I still miss my mother very much sometimes, and when I do I read the Qur’an.”

Elsewhere in the affected provinces, the sense of emotional distress from losing loved ones continues to affect many other tsunami orphans. While the distance of years may help to ease their sorrow, their psychological well-being and current sense of security very much depends on their living situation and who is caring for them.

In the Phang Nga, the province most ravaged by the tsunami, 8-year-old Ratchata Sukanta still cries at night for his mother who perished in the tsunami. He prays in front of her photo every night before going to bed, asking her to become his mother in his next life.

Ratchata has become very attached to his 71-year-old grandmother, Siew Na Talang, who has been caring for him the past four years.

“My grandmother cannot die,” Ratchata told a group of visitors to his home recently. “I am not going to allow her to die.” Ratchata looks forward to the day when he can be reunited with his older brother, Wongkorn, whom he had lived with until the aftermath of the tsunami. Today Wongkorn lives an hour’s drive away with his father’s new family. The separation of the brothers is due to a conflict between relatives over the assistance benefits paid to orphans, Siew said.



“Ratchata Sukanta, 8, greets his grandmother, Siew Na Talang, after he returns from school. Since his mother died in the tsunami, Ratchata has become very attached to his grandmother”.

UNICEF's Bissex said that the situation of the tsunami orphans demands "good case management and follow-up over an extended period of time."

To ensure this, UNICEF has supported the establishment of Child Protection Monitoring and Response Systems in 34 sub-districts (tambons) of the six tsunami-affected provinces in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Mahidol University and local governmental organizations. So far, the situations of more than 76,000 children, including tsunami orphans, have been surveyed in order to better monitor their well-being and to identify those in need of special care and support.

Under the project, social workers based in the area follow up and coordinate with partners to ensure orphans and other vulnerable children receive timely support and protection. This system is seen as being especially useful in monitoring the situation of the tsunami orphans.

"Monitoring of the orphans placements is as equally important as ensuring they are placed in good homes in the first place," Bissex said. "We hope that this model can be implemented across the country and applied to all children in needed."

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