UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN IN THE TSUNAMI-AFFECTED COUNTRIES

Guiding Principles

(The following is based on a document that was released by the Inter-agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children as a guide for organizations working in the tsunami region. It was prepared and is endorsed by UNICEF, UNHCHR, International Committee of the Red Cross, International Rescue Committee, Save the Children UK and World Vision. This text is based on a more comprehensive document put out by the same agencies, providing more detailed guiding principles for all emergency situations. Entitled 'Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children', this document can be viewed at the following link: http://www.unicef.org/protection/files/english_guiding_principles.pdf)

The earthquake and the tsunami of 26 December 2004, like many other natural disasters and displacements of population, led to the separation of large numbers of children. Without any specific person watching over them, separated children who have been placed in holding centers may not receive sufficient life-saving aid, and may also be exposed to the dangers of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Separated children also face danger from child traffickers who may exploit the disaster. Sri Lanka's government fears that children who have been reported missing from hospitals and emergency shelters are being trafficked as domestic aids and for sexual exploitation. Similarly, UNICEF has received reports that children have been trafficked out of Aceh, Indonesia; authorities in Indonesia have since ordered a short-term ban on the movement of children out of Aceh and the country.

Experience has shown that most separated children have parents or other family members willing and able to care for them. Long-term care arrangements, including adoption, should therefore not be made during the emergency phase.

However, action to help separated children does require a long-term perspective and long-term commitment on the part of the organisations involved. These organisations must also seek strong cooperation and coordination, and aim to speak with one voice.

What's Inside...

REPSN Pretest in Mindanao.................................2
Typescript..................................................3
Tsunami Terror..............................................4
News Dispatch..............................................5

Regional Emergency Psychosocial Support Network

www.psychosocialnetwork.org
Adoption should not be considered:

- If there is a reasonable hope of successful tracing and reunification;
- If it is against the expressed wishes of the child or the parents;
- Unless a reasonable time has passed during which all feasible steps to trace the parents or other surviving family member have been carried out.

These principles are particularly relevant in light of incidents like those in Sri Lanka, where the government has received complaints that children displaced by the tsunami are being taken away for adoption without proper authority. Sri Lanka’s National Childcare Protection Authority (NCPA), a state organisation working for the welfare of children, has made public appeals to refrain from taking children away for adoption. According to a government official, the majority of the displaced children in the tsunami-hit coastal parts of the country are living in refugee camps. However, some of them have not been able to trace their parents or relatives, while others are not sure if their parents are among the living. The Sri Lankan government has issued instructions to provide extra protection to the children and maintain proper records to ensure that children are not taken away by individual groups for adoption. Persons intending to adopt children have been urged to follow legal procedures and not take children of their own will, as their relatives or parents may yet be traced. There have been reports of cases in which children have been located by their parents a week after the tsunami disaster.

The pre-test is the latest development after the establishment of the PRSPN during the Regional Experts’ Meeting on Psychosocial Response in Emergency convened by UNICEF-EAPRO in Bangkok, Thailand 2001. “Recent events, like the tsunami that struck that struck areas in the southern Philippines point out to the urgent need of an emergency psychosocial response team,” says Dr. Protacio-de Castro. “More importantly, there is the need to help identify local psychosocial support networks, and build the capacity of them, especially in the areas struck by calamities, to identify people in the local cultural context – the natural nurturers who could support the psychosocial needs of the community after the team has left.” (MPP)
Separated and Unaccompanied Children (continued from page 1)

All actions should be properly coordinated with the government authorities.

The following key definitions, principles and good practices form an agreed platform for partner organisations.

Definitions:

Separated children are those separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.

Unaccompanied children are children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.

Orphans are children both of whose parents are known to be dead. In some countries, however, a child who has lost one parent is called an orphan.

Preventing separation:

Organizations and authorities must ensure that their actions do not inadvertently encourage family separation. Separation can be provoked when families lack the services they need to care for their children and believe such services would be available elsewhere, or when residential child care facilities are created which may provide better services than the family is able to access.

Deliberate separations can be prevented by:

• ensuring that all households have access to basic relief supplies and other services, including education;
• limiting the development of residential care options, and restricting its use to those situations where it is absolutely necessary;
• avoiding the removal of children to other countries for any reason unless critical medical care cannot be provided. This should be provided as close as possible to their home.

Tracing and family reunification:

• Identifying, registering and documenting unaccompanied and separated children is prior to that affected by emergency and should be carried out as quickly as possible.
• Registration activities should be conducted only by or under the direct supervision of Government authorities and mandated agencies with responsibility for and experience in this task;
• The confidential nature of the information collected must be respected and systems put in place for safe-forwards and storage of information. Information must only be shared among duly mandated agencies, for the purpose of tracing, reunification and care;
• Tracing is the process of searching for family members or primary legal or customary care-givers. All those engaged in tracing should use the same approach, with standardized forms and mutually compatible systems;
• The validity of information and relationships is the confirmation of the willingness of the child and family member to be reunited must be verified for every child;
• No action should be taken that may hinder eventual family reunification such as adoption, change of name, or movement to places far from the family’s likely location until all tracing efforts have been exhausted.

Care arrangements

Emergency care

• Care for separated children should be provided in a way that preserves family unity, including of siblings, ensures their protection and facilitates the reuniting. Children’s security should be ensured, their basic needs adequately met, and assistance provided for their emotional support.
• Community care, including fostering, is preferable to institutional care, as it provides continuity in socialization and development.
• However, children not in the care of their parents or customary caregivers may be at heightened risk of abuse and exploitation. The most appropriate carers may need extra assistance to ensure children’s protection and material needs are met. Provision must therefore be made for monitoring and support to foster families.
• For those children for whom institutional care is the only solution, centres should be small, temporary and organized around the needs of the child. It should be made very clear that the objective of residential care is reunification or placement in the community and rigorous screening procedures should be in place to ensure only appropriate admissions.
• Removing children from familiar surroundings will increase their distress and can hinder their recovery. Children should not be removed to other countries for any reason unless critical medical care cannot be provided and then, this should be as close as possible to their home and they should be accompanied by a care-giver known to the child.

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In 30 December, young people from around the world created a space on Voices of Youth on which they can discuss the tsunami, its impact, and how they can help. This online space called “Tsunami Terror” offers a timely and useful forum for young people in the region and elsewhere to express the emotions they experience as they see and hear about this unprecedented crisis in Asia and the shocking numbers of child victims.

Other ideas involved providing tsunami victims with the means to communicate their thoughts and needs with the rest of the world. For example, “L.U.A.Y.” from Romania suggested “Create volunteer centres where the victims of the tsunami especially children and teenagers can access freely the internet” allowing them “to get in touch with other young people around the world who share their feelings and solidarity, and directly for the first time tell them how much they need and how they can protect themselves and avoid being the victims of child traffic.”

Still other young people on the forum voiced their concerns about the inadequacies of the relief efforts. “I live in Singapore and daily I’ve been reading of news saying that aid which is sent to these countries are sitting on the airport tarmacs unable to be distributed. I think that’s not fair to the people who have lost their homes and relatives,” said a 23-year-old girl from Singapore. She wrote: “We can translate those and give them to the kids. They need to get out their mind. That could be a good way to help them get rid of their trauma, by telling it out to somebody else.”

Despite their awareness of the many difficulties that tsunami victims continue to face, the members of this online community retain a sense of optimism that seems to come at least in part from the connectedness with other young people that the forum provides. As Rusiru from Sri Lanka wrote, “Despite their awareness of the many difficulties that tsunami victims continue to face, the members of this online community retain a sense of optimism that seems to come at least in part from the connectedness with other young people that the forum provides.”

Voices of Youth, a website for young people who are interested in issues of human rights and development. Voices of Youth is a space where they can share information on the ways in which they can help those who have been affected by this crisis. On 30 December 2004, young people from around the world created a space on Voices of Youth on which they can discuss the tsunami, its impact, and how they can help.