The unleashed forces of nature can be terrifying and leave devastation and human misery in their wake – witness the Indian Ocean tsunami. Natural disasters in the Asia Pacific span earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, cyclones, floods and droughts.

*Relief in Sight*, AusAID’s travelling photographic exhibition, raises awareness and understanding of Australia’s response to natural disasters and the urgent humanitarian needs to which they give rise.

For more information including dates and venues <www.reliefinsight.com.au>
Where there are no roads. Drought, Papua New Guinea, 1997. A real logistical challenge – delivering urgently needed food aid to remote and inaccessible parts of Papua New Guinea. AusAID and the Government of Papua New Guinea worked with the Australian and Papua New Guinean defence forces to overcome many obstacles. Helicopters were sometimes required to fly up steep valleys and land at villages more than 2,000 metres above sea level. Photo: Darren Hilder/Australian Defence Force

Embrace. Banda Aceh, Indonesia, 2005. An Indonesian nurse embraces Heidi Turnbull from the 1st Health Support Battalion (Sydney) to say ‘thank you’ for the efforts of the Australian medical staff following the Indian Ocean tsunami. AusAID, the Australian Defence Force and Emergency Management Australia each performed vital roles in the relief effort. Photo: Phillip Cullinan/Australian Defence Force

Anxious search. Thailand, 2004. After the Indian Ocean tsunami people searched desperately for friends and loved ones. Pictures of the missing were posted everywhere. More disturbing were the shots of victims found by rescue and salvage teams. The Australian Government sent Australian Federal Police specialists to help with the long, complex and sad process of identifying victims. Photo: Rob Maccoll/The Courier Mail

A new grip on life. Banda Aceh, Indonesia, 2005. Queuing for water from the Australian Army. The water purification plant operated by the Australian Defence Force in Banda Aceh was the only source of drinkable water in the city after the tsunami. AusAID helped source and deliver well over a thousand 20-litre water containers and provided funding for a water and sanitation specialist to help local authorities address the city’s immediate water supply and sanitation needs. Photo: Belinda Mepham/Australian Defence Force
Eyes on fire. Bushfires in East Kalimantan, Indonesia 1997. Massive bushfires burned out of control blanketing parts of Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. Australia provided equipment, including aerial water bombing services, and training to fight the fires. Photo: Dermot Tatlow /Panos Pictures

Boxes of fun. Indonesia, 2006. In spite of what they've been through in the Indian Ocean tsunami, children in a camp in Banda Aceh manage to smile and play. Before they became great toys, the boxes contained lamps from the Australian Red Cross. Later the people in this camp were able to move into steel-framed transitional accommodation, built by the Red Cross with the help of AusAID funding. Photo: Amanda McClelland/Australian Red Cross

In safe hands. Earthquake, Pakistan, 2005. The reach of Australian aid stretches a long way, as World Vision’s John Schenk discovered while helping to deliver tents, sleeping bags and blankets in Siren Valley. The Australian Government, through non-government organisations like World Vision, provided $80 million in relief and reconstruction assistance to the thousands of survivors left homeless. AusAID was quick to mobilise a team of experts to help the Government of Pakistan assess damage to critical infrastructure such as hospitals, schools and water systems. Photo: World Vision
I was staying on the island of Koh-Raya with my wife, Megan, and a group of friends. We were taking a break – I'd been working in Japan for a few years and it was time for a holiday.

We'd been on the island for almost a week and had made the most of our time – sleeping in, breakfast on the beach, scuba diving, reading books... that kind of thing. We'd had a fantastic holiday but the day had inevitably come when we had to get the boat back to Phuket and start our return journey to Japan.

The day of our departure I was on the beach in the early morning waiting for the diving shop to open. I wanted to pay for the trip we'd been on the day before. As I sat drinking a coffee at one of the beachfront cafes I heard laughter coming from the waters edge. I looked up. One of the boats moored near the shore had tipped over on a sandbank and spilled some chairs into the bay. A few people were around and began to lend a hand. I went down to join them.

Halfway there I met Wolfgang, one of the diving instructors. We both commented on the low water level but put it down to a very big tide. There had been a full moon the night before. It seemed a plausible explanation at the time.

A few minutes later we looked up and were surprised to see a reef jutting out of the water along the edge of the bay. It took us a few seconds to realise that we had been diving there the day before. We knew things were not as they should be, but just then the tide swung around and the water level began to rise again.

As we headed back up the beach to the diving shop the water followed, going back to its original height before a swell lifted it a few extra metres up the beach. Wolfgang and I stood and watched as the water started to go out again, this time much faster and further, causing a few other boats to tip over and break their moorings. As the water reached its lowest point – perhaps 50 metres down the beach – we noticed a very large black swell of water forming behind. It had all the dynamics of a normal wave – sucked-in water towards the bottom and the crest rising above

THAILAND: Disasters are random. They can strike anywhere at any time with varying ferocity so that no one is immune from harm, even death. Those who survive – rich or poor, young or old – live with the trauma of the disaster long after the event. Australian John Russell, one of many holiday makers in the wrong place at the wrong time, tells of his ordeal during the Indian Ocean tsunami.