



Australian Government

AusAID

Media Briefing

Launch of the Maldives Coral Reef Assessment Report

16 March 2005

Alan March, Assistant Director General, AusAID:

Look thanks very much for coming.

Obviously the tsunami impact has been widespread across the immediate region, and the Australian response has been timely and significant.

Over 400 Australians have responded to that, some as immediate humanitarian workers, and others working on assessment programs and assessment missions.

For the Maldives specifically we've been able to provide a team of medical practitioners in the first instance. We followed that up with 15 teachers and we also contributed an engineering assessment mission and a coral reef assessment mission. And in addition we've provided medical supplies and consumables.

John Gunn led that, on behalf of CSIRO led that mission, the reef assessment mission, and those recommendations are before government.

We'll be considering those recommendations, and depending upon the priority that the Maldives Government accords those, we'll look at our capacity to take those recommendations forward, working in hand with other countries that are contributing.

Let me hand over to John who can give a little bit more insight into the detail of the coral reef assessment mission. Thanks.

John Gunn, CSIRO, Head of the Maldives Coral Reef Assessment team:

Thanks Alan. Well as Alan mentioned I led a delegation or a mission from Australia to the Maldives. Seems like a long time ago now, but about a month or so ago.

The delegation consisted of CSIRO marine research staff, staff from the Australian Institute of Marine Science - AIMS - Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, James Cook University and AusAID. And it was a team largely put together because of its expertise in a whole range of issues of coral reef structure, coral reef ecology, fisheries, and in particular coral reef fisheries.

And our mission was really to go and work with the Maldivian Research Centre, Marine Research Centre, to assess in a rapid way the impacts of the tsunami on the coral reefs.

I believe a report will be released very soon and be available for the public, and in essence I can tell you that the report generally reports very good news that the tsunami had very little direct impact on the coral reefs.

I think it's probably quite lucky, the Maldivian country is essentially built on coral reefs, it's a series of many thousands of islands and reefs, and a large part of the Maldivian economy is reliant on tourism based on coral reef and fisheries that are run out of the reef system.

So the assessment of damage was that in fact there was very little damage. The fisheries impact was again very minimal, and even the damage to the islands - while a lot of buildings were swept over and there's obviously a lot of human impact, the damage to islands in terms of soil loss, changes in structure in fact was very minimal as well.

So I think at the end of our 17 day mission the Maldivian Government had I guess a clean bill of health in terms of their islands and their reefs and I think we left there with them feeling much better than they did before we arrived.

So perhaps with that synopsis I'll see if anybody would like to ask questions.

Alan March:

I might add that the copy of the report will be available on the AusAID website as of two o'clock today.

Question:

Sorry I'm late, I'm just wondering how did the damage in the Maldives compare to other places damaged by the tsunami?

John Gunn:

Well you know the assessment that was undertaken by this team, our team in the Maldives, was very similar to the types of assessments that are being made in Thailand and in Sri Lanka.

You'd have to say that in terms of their coastal systems the damage to the Maldives was a lot less than what we are hearing through reports back from assessment teams in other parts of the eastern Indian Ocean, and I think that's principally because the Maldives didn't suffer from the large wave events that we saw graphically in news services out of Thailand and Sumatra and the like.

That's largely because of the topography of those islands, although they're incredibly mountainous country, they're largely volcanic mountains but only about a metre of them are above the water. So in fact when these waves came through, rather than creating a large breaking wave, the Maldives suffered just essentially a rise in sea level.

In fact one of the quite amazing sort of oft repeated comments from people in the Maldives was, we were talking to them, was that there was no wave, they really felt like their islands were sinking. They

were standing with no frame of reference other than looking out to the sea thinking - remember they have a sort of altitude of about one metre above sea level - and for all intents and purposes all they saw was the sea rising. And they concluded that in fact their islands were sinking, rather than there being a wave covering them.

So the damage that was caused to the land was largely because of the type of structures that their houses are made out of, which is coral rubble and very little concrete, and so most of the damage in the Maldives is that sort of housing and domestic arrangement changes, rather than the coral reefs.

Question:

And so will the reefs need to regenerate and how long will it take?

Gunn:

Well it's an interesting point. The Maldives in 1998 were probably one of the worst hit countries in the world in the large coral bleaching event. Coral bleaching occurs when water temperatures get basically over the comfort zones of corals, and in the Maldives that caused over 98% mortality. So over 98% of their reef died in 1998.

So when we arrived, what is it, seven years later, we found a reef that was only just beginning to regenerate, so something between five and 12% of the coral reef is covered with live coral, and the rest of the Maldivian reefs are dead.

So it is a critical question as to whether the tsunami and the small effects that we saw is actually going to slow down that recovery, that regrowth of coral. And I think the verdict is really a bit hung at the moment, we'd need follow-up work to be able to tell whether that's going to be, whether it's going to have some type of impairment on regrowth of Maldivian coral reefs.

Question:

And so you've already probably said but how extensive was the damage?

Gunn:

Well we found that in all of the systems we looked at and noting that there's 900 kilometres of coral reefs and we managed to visit probably less than one percent of those in our rapid assessment, although we did cover a lot of ground, damage was generally less than 10%.

So although there's a low coral cover, most of that was okay, and it was only in a few instances where we saw large movements of rubble and boulders rolling down reef slopes that we saw large instances of coral death. So by and large, not a lot of live coral and not a lot of damage to that that there is.

Question:

So the impact on tourism is not going to be large because of the coral, more the damage to the actual infrastructure on the islands?

Gunn:

Yeah, certainly the Ministry for Tourism that we worked fairly closely with during our time there is dealing with a large scale impact on its tourism facilities. I think close to 20 of their major resorts have closed, either having to be rebuilt totally or repaired. And yeah they're losing very important income for the Maldives through damage to their facilities rather than to the reefs.

I should say that the Ministry for Tourism was obviously very interested in getting a clean bill of health on their coral reefs because with the age of the internet, people learn very quickly about facilities or corals that are damaged and so the good news that we were able to give the Maldivian Government I think has been used very much in their tourism promotion of late.

Question:

And so what will the action be now from the Australian Government? Is it concentrating more on Aceh or will there be a further relationship with the Maldives?

John Gunn:

I can speak quickly for the Maldives. We left the country having made a set of recommendations that as Alan March has said is before the Maldivian and the Australian Governments for consideration at the moment. In terms of other areas, and I think Alan March is probably the person best to talk about that.

Alan March:

Yeah, look thanks very much John. In the context of the Maldives we're looking at the recommendations and we have the ability to advance some of those priority recommendations through aid program funding.

We would be also looking at other international donors such as the UN environment program which has been involved in reef assessment and reef strategy work to be a partner in some of this activity. And as we've all heard from the news there is an enormous amount of funding available from a range of civil, society, commercial as well as traditional donors, and I would imagine a mix of that will be brought to bear.

In terms of overall funding, we've got a funding envelope of \$4 million for the Maldives. That is not all committed and we'd be looking to apply some of that uncommitted money to follow-up work.

Quite clearly the Australian Government's focus in responding to the tsunami is in Indonesia and Sri Lanka. They are the large countries that we are contributing the immediate humanitarian and reconstruction funding to. In the case of Indonesia, it's 32 million of humanitarian funding, in the case

of Sri Lanka it's 10 million. But then on top of that sits the one billion dollar partnership with Indonesia.

Question:

And what sort of areas will you be looking at with that \$4 million?

Alan March:

In the case of Maldives there are recommendations that look at additional assessments to confirm some of the findings, strategies and monitoring regimes so that with this baseline you can then look at how trends are going, and then quite specific rehabilitation and additional work that would build on the national capacities to monitor their own reef environment and fisheries environment.

It's the capacity building ones that would be of significant interest to AusAID but we need to talk that through with the Maldivian officials.

John Gunn:

I might just weigh in there. One of the strong recommendations from the team was in fact that given the fragility of coral reef systems generally, a system of larger marine protected areas - I guess something akin to our Great Barrier Reef Marine Park concept - would certainly go a long way to protecting a lot of their reef systems.

They have good legislation protecting their reefs but they don't necessarily have marine protected areas, so one of the strong recommendations that the group made which wouldn't involve necessarily Australian aid money, but certainly could do with some Australian intellectual property and experience, would be to assist them in designing and implementing a more comprehensive marine park system throughout that country.

Certainly as they try and rebuild their reefs that could be a major initiative that the Maldivian Government would get I think a lot of support from non-governmental organisation, a set of coral reef networks that are very active all around the world.

Alan March:

Thanks very much for your time.

John Gunn:

Thank you.

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