

Sterling crew in rescue of Tsunami Victims

Editor's note: An international effort is bringing relief to the thousands of people in South Asia devastated by the tsunami of Dec. 26, 2004. Among the many problems left in the tsunami's wake has been pests and concerns about pest-related diseases. One PCO who has responded to the need for pest control is Veejai Ahluwalia, CEO of Sterling Pest Control, Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India. Ahluwalia and three members of his crew traveled to hard-hit South India and volunteered their pest control services. Ahluwalia kept the following journal.

December 26

My family and I are enjoying our holiday just like everyone else. Saturdays and Sundays are a bit busy for pest controllers but since Saturday was Christmas, Sunday was like an extended holiday. In fact, my elder son Varun, who is 5 years old, was asking me to take him to the movie "The Incredibles" since it was a holiday. I did *not* watch any television that evening, so I went to bed with no knowledge of the tsunami that hit the southern coastal area of our country.

December 27

Mumbai is located in the northern part of India and was unaffected by the tsunami. I am thankful that my family and employees are all safe. It wasn't until I read the newspaper this morning that I really grasped the magnitude of this disaster.

7 a.m. — I got a call at 7 a.m. in the morning from a government official asking me whether I would like to go to the tsunami-affected areas with my crew. I immediately said, "Yes." Although pest control is my business I decided not to charge any amount for the services I would provide. A famous quote by President John F. Kennedy comes to my mind: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Later on I told my dad and wife that I may have to go, and they wholeheartedly supported me.

11 a.m. — It was clear that I was going to Chennai — it's about 621 miles (1000 kms) from my place and takes nearly 24 hours by train. Since traveling by train would have exhausted us and consumed a lot of time, we decided to fly. I booked airline tickets for me as well as three of my crew.

Noon — I told my crew to gather their clothes and equipment and meet me at the airport to catch the 6 p.m. flight. My wife, incidentally, brought my luggage from the house and gave it to me in my office. I am thankful to my supplier Sharat Shanbag, who went to the trouble of arranging the pesticides that I needed within one hour of my inquiry.

6 p.m. — There was a bit of problem at the airport. Pesticides weren't allowed with us in the luggage despite showing security a letter stating that we were going for emergency work, so I had to cancel my current 6 p.m. flight and book myself on the 8 p.m. flight, while my crew went ahead on the 6 p.m. flight. I had to send the pesticides in a cargo aircraft of a courier company. It took nearly 1 hour and 45 minutes to reach Chennai. We reached Chennai in the night and stayed in a hotel near the airport.

December 28

6:30 a.m. — I awoke early and proceeded to the airport to pick up the pesticide supplies from the courier company.

8:30 a.m. — I picked up the supplies and we set out by vehicle en route to the township of Kalpakkam, which is nearly 49 miles (80 kms) away from Chennai. It took us nearly 1½ hours to reach the town.

Noon — Upon entering the town we met with city officials and were immediately asked to go to the hospital. We reached the site and immediately went to work. The scenes I saw were like a nightmare and brought tears to my eyes. I never would have imagined Mother Nature was capable of such fury. It took nearly 2½ half hours to spray inside and outside the external perimeter of the hospital.

Late afternoon — Much of the latter half of the day was spent meeting officers and making a plan on how to go about the operations.

Late evening — We were about to start work when there was concern that water was rising in the sea. Panic was spreading throughout the town. It turned out to be a false alarm/rumor. We retired into the night but could hardly get any sleep.

December 29

7:30 a.m. — We got up early and began work about 7:30 a.m. The tsunami had left behind lots of sand, drains were clogged with sand and there was dirt all around. We began spraying inside the houses that were hit by the tsunami waves. Sanitation and hygiene was a major concern. Work was being carried out by engineers at a fast pace. Flies were the major pests that we encountered. Houses are cleaned thoroughly by people after spraying. Since drains were clogged, engineers were on the job. We were providing the services of general pest control and larvicidal treatment in pools of stagnant water for mosquito larva control as well as spraying in the drains and exposed water bodies.

The scenes we witnessed were tragic. Many an eye seemed filled with tears. In fact it brought to my mind the memories of the scenes witnessed in some of the documentaries of *National Geographic* "When nature Strikes." There was sand everywhere, even inside the houses. The water had come to nearly windowsill-level inside the houses. The doors were broken and quite a bit of damage seem to have been caused.

I could see the little boy in me when I saw kids trying to dry their school books out in the sun, some trying to salvage their computers, television sets, etc. They were left useless but then children defy conventional wisdom — they never give up. The word "no" doesn't exist in their dictionary.

I was moved by the "never give up" spirit of the locals. They lost a lot. Some lost their near and dear ones, but they remained optimistic and full of hope. They exhibited a "we shall overcome this tragedy" attitude.

December 30

We are continuing on our ongoing spraying operations in homes. The people we've met have told stories of surviving by climbing up trees and running upstairs. One man who shared his experience told me how he saved himself, and his son and mother, by climbing to a window shade (a shade that prevents rain from entering the

window) when the waves came in. With one hand he held his son and with the other hand he held his mother.

Another told me how a priest was saved inside a temple. Many young and brave men had thrown themselves in the surging waves and rescued many lives.

We worked continuously with just a ½-hour break for lunch. Usually one feels tired after working for a while, but we seemed to have overcome such petty things. We had a mission in front of us. We were working late, until 11:30 p.m. A project that may have taken weeks to complete was done twice in five days. We used a granule product for the larvicidal treatment in places of stagnant water and water bodies. Spraying was done in open drains, exterior perimeters of houses, as well as inside homes.

After four days I returned. My crew stayed for two more days. It went so fast that I can't believe it was only four days. But as they say "time and tide waits for no one."

Future Needs.

I am trying to interact with my colleagues in the pest control industry to provide pest control to other needy areas. But there are some coordination problems. They seem to be facing resistance from local bodies who are asking them for a permission letter to carry out such work.

Coordination is being done at various levels to get relevant approval from the required bodies so that the work can be undertaken. It has to be emphasized that the government bodies alone cannot be expected to take up the task — everyone must contribute with their efforts. Many of my colleagues and I are trying to get pesticides made available so that such work can be carried out.

I along with my colleagues in the pest control industry plan to visit some of the areas in a few months from now and contribute whatever we can. India is a huge country. Many people are putting forth efforts and helping the people. Many of the efforts go unrecognized. Many NGOs (non-government organizations) are doing their best to help the people. Government too is doing its best so that normalcy is restored.

Time to Reflect

This was the most eventful year of my life and I will remember it forever. Finally, for the first time in my life I felt that I could contribute a bit from myself and got immense satisfaction out of it. I am proud to be a pest control operator who was able to give back to his country in its time of need.