

WHEN DISASTERS OVERSEAS STRIKE HOME

International disasters only hit the Australian headlines for a day or two, then disappear – pushed off by the next local event or celebrity divorce. But for refugee communities, hearing news that the country from which they were forced to leave has been hit by an earthquake, cyclone or tsunami can bring back anxiety and trauma. **FRANCES ELLERY** talked to some of those affected by recent disasters.



Lucy Marin was at home watching the Viña del Mar International Song Festival on Chilean cable TV when an enormous earthquake hit the coast of Chile at 3am local time on 27 February. Immediately she and her husband tried to phone their families back home but for 48 hours they couldn't get through – by phone or by email.

Gradually more news came through – 35 dead, 75, 150, 300, 700. It was hard to find out which cities and coastal towns were worst affected and it was days before the true level of devastation filtered through. "After two days I found out that my family in Santiago were safe, but I didn't hear from one cousin in Concepción for five days," Lucy says, "because they had no electricity. I became obsessive. I wanted to watch the TV day and night. I felt frustrated that I wasn't there to help."

Like thousands of Chileans – in Australia and scattered around the world, Lucy and her husband left Chile to escape the Pinochet dictatorship. "We got married just after the military coup in September 1973," she says, "and came here in 1977 with our baby. Some of my relatives on my mother's side had been killed or 'disappeared'. It was too dangerous to stay in Chile."

Having lived here for 33 years and brought up her two sons in Australia, Lucy – who works as a counsellor with STARTTS – considers this country 'home'. But hearing news of the earthquake, she felt the tug of her original homeland. "It left me feeling in limbo," she says, "... as though my heart was out there somewhere floating between the two countries. I didn't think anyone except other Chileans would understand."

No news = bad news?

It was two weeks before Celia Clavero heard that her husband's family had survived the earthquake and subsequent tsunami in Tomé, just north of Talcahuano. "I couldn't sleep," she says, "and I'm still nervous as every day there are more tremors. My sister in Valparaiso lost her house and couldn't work because for days there was no electricity or water."

Celia came to Australia in 1987 after her husband had been tortured and imprisoned for over a year. For Lucy, Celia and other Chileans who lived through the Pinochet years, the sight of troops on the streets after the earthquake brought back terrifying memories of the brutality and repression of that regime. Were the soldiers really there to protect? Could they be trusted? Many people were particularly nervous because the recent elections had brought to power Chile's first right-wing president (with links to the Pinochet regime) since the country returned to democracy in December 1989.

Information was even harder to come by when Cyclone Nargis killed thousands and left millions homeless in Burma's Yangon city and the Ayeyarwady delta, in May 2008. At the time, Daniel Zu had been in Australia for just over a year, having being forced to flee his country, along with thousands of other Karen people, and then spending ten years in a refugee camp in Thailand.

"As soon as I heard about the cyclone, I tried to phone my mum, brothers and sisters, but all the phone lines were down," Daniel says. "When I finally got through, my mum said, 'Don't worry, no one's been hurt. The roof's just been ripped off the house.' Actually, this was a big thing, but she didn't want to worry me."

Getting information in or out of Burma isn't easy at the best of times. Daniel says he's careful to only talk about personal things when he speaks to his family. Many Karen and Burmese refugees simply can't afford to phone home (a 30-minute phone card costs \$10). The Australian government set up free phone lines so that people could call home immediately after the cyclone, but the Burmese government blocked information, as well as foreign aid.

A lucky escape

Sam Pari's parents brought her to Australia from Sri Lanka when she was just a baby. When the Indian Ocean tsunami devastated the country's eastern and southern coastline on 26 December 2004, Sam was volunteering at an orphanage in the north-eastern town of Mullaitivu. "If I hadn't overslept that morning, I'd have been down on the beach," she says. "I was able to phone my parents to let them know I was safe and decided to stay on in Sri Lanka to do what I could. I wanted to get further down the eastern coast – which was badly hit – but I couldn't get past Trincomalee. Because I'm Tamil, I was stopped at gunpoint and turned back by government soldiers."

The lives of many of those who lost loved ones, homes, schools and hospitals in the tsunami – particularly Tamils living in the north and east of the country – had already been torn apart by 20 years of war. "It was the poorest families and those living closest to the beach who were worst affected," Sam says. "Many had been forced to leave their homes by war and were already living in temporary shelters."

Community spirit

Despite the individual trauma and isolation those worrying about loved ones can feel, they all talk about the amazing solidarity they experienced both within their own communities and from other Australians.

Lucy Marin tells of how the Chilean earthquake brought together not just Chileans but other Latin Americans – who came together to raise funds for families who'd lost their homes and livelihoods. "We forgot our old differences," she says [referring to historic hostilities between, for example, Chile, Bolivia and Peru], "and organised a massive fundraiser in Fairfield. We've already raised \$100,000, and we've set up a committee to carry on fundraising for Haiti and Chile." Celia Clavero says she wants to thank everyone – not just Latin Americans, but Australians too, for all the support they've given.

Because the Karen people have been brutally persecuted by the Burmese government for more than 60 years, Sydney's Karen community immediately

started lobbying for aid to help poor Karen farmers in the Ayeyarwady delta while Burmese and Karen refugees in Sydney came together to fundraise and work through the Joint Action Committee for Democracy in Burma.

Sam Pari says, "The Tamil community here collected donations and the wider Australian community opened their hearts and gave millions of dollars for tsunami survivors in Sri Lanka. But it was virtually impossible to get any aid to Tamils living in government-controlled areas. It was much easier to send aid to areas controlled by the so-called terrorists, the LTTE.

"This led to some Australian Tamils being accused of supporting a terrorist organisation, but the LTTE was the de facto government in the areas it controlled. We were able to travel freely to inspect projects in those areas – such as the rebuilding of houses, schools and hospitals – and to see accounts showing how our money had been spent."

Poorest hit hardest

In any disaster, it's the poorest who are hardest hit. They're more likely to live in the most disaster-prone areas and in the least structurally robust homes. It also takes them longer to recover their livelihoods and get access to clean water, healthcare and education. Governments with a history of repression and discrimination are selective about where money goes – often it's those who need it most who get the least, and are last.

Sam Pari says, "Much of the foreign aid raised to support tsunami survivors has been blocked by extreme elements in the government who took the Post Tsunami Operational Management Scheme (set up in an agreement between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) to court. Not only has foreign aid not reached Tamils, the extremists' action has prevented it being distributed to Sinhalese survivors."

Like Sam, Daniel Zu is concerned that most foreign aid doesn't reach those who need it most. Ostracised by the rest of the world for years, and subject to international sanctions, the Burmese (Myanmar) government is now receiving foreign aid, 80 per cent of which, Daniel says, is going straight into the pockets of the generals.

In Chile, the government has been criticised for concentrating on the cities and financial centres of Santiago and Concepción rather than poorer areas, including those that are home to the country's indigenous population. Lucy Marin says, "The government will only spend money where they'll get an economic return. They're not going to get anything back from the poorest people, so it's going to be the same as in any other trauma in Latin America. The poor people will have to depend on international support. Not one government official has visited the areas where the indigenous communities live."

Beyond the headlines

Disasters – which, with global warming and the impact

of environmental degradation are becoming more frequent and affecting more people – usually make the news for just a few days until they're pushed out by the next event (or celebrity divorce). But long after they've disappeared from the headlines, disasters and the trauma that they bring stay in the hearts and minds of those who have families and friends in those countries. Even with ample resources, it takes communities years to recover and rebuild their lives. But when natural disaster comes on top of war and persecution, it is even harder and takes even longer.

In Burma, Karen farmers in the Ayeyarwady delta, who lost the animals that they used for ploughing and whose farmland has been ruined by salination, have had their lands appropriated by government-owned companies and are now having to work as paid labourers. The army still uproots entire villages, forcing villagers to hide in the surrounding countryside, which is heavily mined.

In Sri Lanka, last year 300,000 Tamils were forced into military-run internment camps during the government's bombardment of the north. Although in January this year the government said they were free to go, many have no homes to go back to. Sam Pari says, "The current influx of Tamils seeking asylum in Australia is a direct reflection of the continuing and real fear of persecution in Sri Lanka."

And Chileans here and in Chile are watching closely for fear that the February earthquake and recent elections auger a return to a past that many have spent years trying to recover from. Celia Clavero says, "After three days, there was no more news [in Australia] about what was happening in Chile. People are still living in tents. It's raining and children are suffering with chest infections. I don't want people over here to forget them."

By 2015, the number of people affected by climate-related disasters each year is predicted to grow by more than 50 per cent to an average of over 375 million people. According to Oxfam (2009) *The Right to Survive and Forecasting*, the numbers of people affected annually by natural disasters is up to 2015, internal Oxfam study (April 2009) available at www.oxfam.org

