

## New year sans joy

**Despite the terrible tragedy, ironically enough, Malaysia saw some positive results from the tsunami disaster**

The tsunami of 26 December 2004 caught Malaysians offguard. Malaysia was fortunate because it was shielded by Sumatra island in Indonesia, which bore the brunt of the tsunami. In Malaysia, the most affected were fishing villages. The impact on capture fisheries, especially on inshore fishing and aquaculture, was significant.

Seventy-four lives were lost to the tsunami, which left a trail of destruction, overturning motorcycles, moving concrete road dividers and cars, and damaging homes along the coast. Fishing boats went under waves measuring 2.5-3 m. Fishing boats were found stuck on tree tops and deep in nearby mangrove forests. The salty trail of the tsunami could be seen for almost 2 km inland.

The wave hit the shore at different times. A tremor was felt at 8.45 am for about one to two minutes. The first hit came after three hours (at 11 am) at Kuala Pulau Betong in southwest Penang. The first tide hit the popular picnic spot, Batu Ferringhi in the northeast around 12.30 pm, and a stronger second tidal wave came around 2.15 pm. Tanjung Tokong, another northeast town, was hit from 1.45 pm to 2 pm. The neighbouring Kedah State was hit at 1.15 pm.

Overall, the losses incurred by the four tsunami-hit States were around Rm55.7 mn (Rm1 = US\$ 0.263). A total of 5,997 fishermen were affected, and 2,387 traditional fishing craft and 271 boats were damaged. Boatowners and their crew recorded Rm30 mn worth of losses.

Aquaculture operators estimated their losses at Rm24 mn. A total of 103 jetties were damaged, costing about Rm1.69 mn. Around 5,000 people were evacuated to relief centres.

As immediate aid, the government gave out Rm1,000 for each person lost to the tsunami, Rm200 for the injured, and Rm200 for families to evacuate. From the Governor's Relief Fund, each schoolgoing child got Rm80. Later, as a first-stage payment, displaced families were given Rm500 each. In the second stage, Rm5,000 were given for houses completely destroyed, Rm2,000 for damaged houses, Rm1,000 for damaged small boats and Rm3,000 for damaged bigger boats. Assessments of the actual loss of each family were done at the third stage. The estimated losses per family range from Rm10,000 to Rm100,000. The government has set aside Rm50 mn for interest-free loans to be given through the Fishermen Development Board. The Education Department has given priority for scholarships for the affected children.

The deputy Finance Minister announced that the government was prepared to use Rm100 mn from the National Housing Project as an interest-free loan to rebuild tsunami-destroyed houses. It was also announced that the National Housing Company would build houses on flat land priced at Rm40,000 each, with a government subsidy of Rm13,333. Houses on stilts would cost Rm50,000, with a subsidy of Rm16,666. Repayments can be made at Rm100 for 22 years or Rm50 for 44 years.

### Supplies dropped

After the tsunami, fish supplies dropped temporarily by 90 per cent and the prices of white pomfret, black pomfret and threadfin fish went up accordingly. A hundred tonnes of dead fish got washed ashore on the morning after the tsunami at Pasir Pandak beach in Teluk Bahang, a fishing village in the northeast. Dead fish were also seen in other areas along the coast.

**M**any sad stories were related during this time. The wave swept away everything on the day of the wedding of Mohamad Anuar Mohd Akhir and Juliana Mohd Nayan at Sungai Petani, Kedah. Zulkifli Md. Noor, 43, lost his five children to the tidal wave. 42-year-old Anna Mary's 20-day old baby was fortunately saved by a floating mattress. The fishermen who lost their homes and gear, in general, had no savings and had to depend on well-wishers.

In Malaysia the situation is now slowly returning to normal. The affected people are already returning to their homes, some of which have been newly built. The fishermen's boats are being repaired at designated workshops. Some of the fishermen have started going out to sea, while others are waiting for their boats and engines to be ready. It might take another month or two before everyone can go out to sea to continue their livelihood. Long queues are seen for boat repair; spare parts and nets are scarce because of increased demand, and most of the material is sourced from Thailand. Even as the fishermen are in the process of rebuilding their lives, they worry about the possibility of another tsunami and how to protect their lives and properties.

The Malaysian Prime Minister has voiced his support to save Malaysia's remaining mangroves, which acted as a buffer during the tsunami, and to replant mangroves wherever possible. Local newspapers widely reported how fishermen's lives were saved by mangroves. Mangrove forests act as protection against storms, soil erosion and floods. Mangroves are also important breeding, feeding and nursery grounds for many aquatic species. Most importantly, they serve as habitat for many flora and fauna, and the biodiversity they sustain is crucial for conservation.

The fishermen in Malaysia affected by the tsunami have appealed to the Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA) to continue to plant mangroves in the coastal areas. PIFWA is a community-based non-profit organization that deals with issues of coastal environment and inshore fishing

communities, and especially of mangrove restoration. Since 1997, the fisherfolk have planted more than 32,000 mangrove saplings. The latest replanting project was implemented in November 2004.

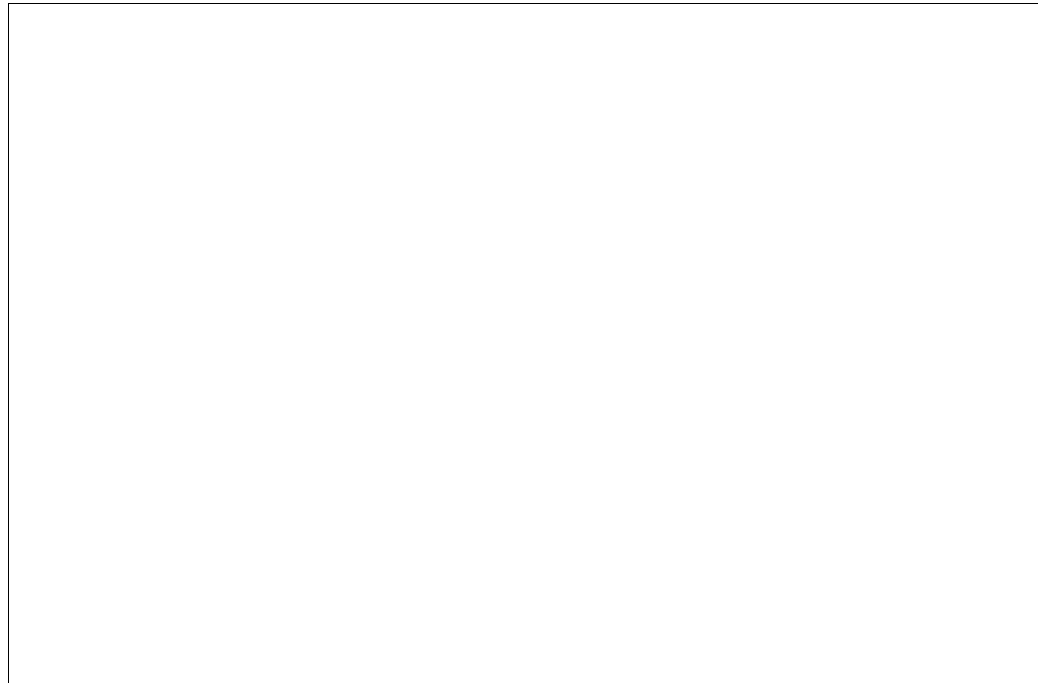
The growing demand for aquaculture development has caused more mangrove forests to be felled. Since 1966, 130 ha of mangroves areas have been cleared and now there are only 900 ha left in the State of Penang. If this trend is left unchecked, Penang will lose all its mangroves by the year 2025. Thus, there is an immediate need to rehabilitate and regenerate the mangrove forests in the State.

The damages to the physical structure of the coastal ecosystem in Penang is quite obvious. The tsunami onslaught physically removed flora and fauna, and caused siltation and sedimentation of river mouths, and erosion of river banks, making it difficult for the fishermen to go out to the sea. Sea water intrusion into the paddy fields also occurred. The increase in water runoff has, however, enriched the sea with nutrients from the land.

Despite the terrible and unprecedented tragedy caused by the tsunami, there were, ironically enough, some positive results of the disaster. Apart from the renewed importance to mangroves, the second positive outcome of the tsunami is the return of the traditional *bisik-bisik* (whisper) auction among the fishermen selling their catches. After 17 years, the crowds are trailing back to Kuala Muda to buy fish directly from fishermen. Both the fishermen and middlemen rely on the traditional *bisik-bisik* auction, which was last carried out in 1998. It is a "lock, stock and barrel" deal where the successful bidder walks away with all types of fish wrapped in a plastic sheet or in baskets. No weighing scale is used as everything is based on estimates. Fishermen do not fear being cheated as everyone involved knows the market value of the fish. Earlier, the fishermen were unhappy as they had to buy ice to keep the fish fresh until the bidding opened at 1 pm. Usually, the fishermen are back from sea by 10 am.

#### **Middlemen**

The authorities stopped the *bisik-bisik* auction 17 years ago to protect the fishermen's interests as middlemen were



monopolizing the market and controlling prices. However, the move did not go down well with the fishermen since open bidding was time-consuming and they had to wait a long time before disposing their catches. They also had to buy blocks of ice to keep the fish fresh.

**T**he *bisik-bisik* system gave them the freedom to sell their catches to the highest bidder as soon as they reached the shore. (There is an unwritten rule preventing middlemen from approaching the boat; they have to wait until the fisherman calls for bidding.) Prized species like prawns, pomfrets and groupers are sold separately, especially during the festival period. Although the *bisik-bisik* system is practised in certain northern States of Malaysia, it is not widespread and is unlikely to catch on since the authorities do not favour it.

The third positive outcome of the tsunami could be said to be the revival of solidarity between the public and the fishermen. Participation from NGOs, voluntary organizations and corporate bodies need to be commended. The amount of food donated and clothings collected surpassed the needs of the moment. Monetary donations were handed over to the government in most cases, even though some organizations preferred to hand over money directly to the affected fishermen. Women's groups arranged to go to the fish landing sites to buy fish

directly to allay fears of contaminated fish. The fear of contaminated fish and water-borne diseases surfaced quickly and disappeared as quickly, as the Chinese New Year was fast approaching. Fish and prawns are the main items on the menus of Chinese communities during the traditional reunion dinner.

However, by and large, the Chinese New Year of the Rooster following the tsunami saw no festive joy, no cooking, no new clothes, no decorations or celebrations. Mandarin oranges were the only prayer offering, instead of the usual cookies, fruits, groundnuts, meat and sweets. ❧

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