

RAHUL VENKIT IN PHUKET
rahul.venkit@newstoday.com.sg

FRAMED photograph of a little girl in hand, Mr Vimon Thongtae soaked in the idyllic calm as the gentle waters of the Andaman Sea kissed the shores of Ban Nam Kem beach in Phang Nga, Thailand.

However, in December 2004, the setting was anything but serene.

"Waves more than 20ft (6.1m) tall crashed onto my house. I was scrambling to save my sister, six nephews and my three-year-old daughter, Sudarat," said the 48-year-old fisherman, gesturing towards the photo frame.

But the monstrous tsunami showed no mercy, sweeping away his family, house and livelihood in a matter of minutes.

It did not, however, break Mr Thongtae's steely resolve.

"The tsunami might have taken away everything from me, but it did not take away my hope," he told TODAY. "We will recover. We will overcome all obstacles with resilience – that is the Thai way."

WHEN VICTIMS BECOME HEROES

It was to remember the victims and salute the spirit of those such as Mr Thongtae that the Thai government organised the *One Year in Memory of Tsunami* events in Phuket, Khao Lak and Phi Phi Island.

Many of the participants are heroes in their own right, having chosen to look beyond personal loss and save lives when the raging waters invaded their shores.

"I might not have been able to save my family members, but I did save four tourists," said Mr Thongtae. "I used the roof of my house as a float and managed to drag them on top of it. We then clung on to nearby coconut trees until the waters receded."

Mr Thongtae's deeds did not stop there. Choosing not to wait for official help, he brought together fellow fishermen affected by the tsunami and formed the Khao Lak Fishermen's Forum.

"With the help of foreign donations, we managed to raise funds of 8 million baht (\$328,304), which will go towards the rebuilding of Ban Nam Kem district," he said.

"Just because I am a victim does not mean I cannot help others."

According to official figures, the tsunami on Dec 26, 2004, claimed 5,396 lives in Thailand. Without the selfless acts of those such as Mr Thongtae, that number would have been much higher.

WHEN THE TSUNAMI MET THE THAI WAY

How compassion overcame a force of nature



WE REMEMBER: A commemorative wreath laid at Patong Beach, Phuket (top). A photograph of three-year-old Sudarat, who was killed by the waves, being held by her father, Mr Vimon Thongtae (above).

WELCOME TO THE FAMILY

However, survivors attending the ceremony such as the Haltmeyers from Austria kept their distance from the shore.

"We cannot bring ourselves to enter the water. The images of dead bodies floating in these waters still haunt us," said Mr Heinrich Haltmeyer, 54.

Last year, his wife Ernestine and

14 other friends were staying at a resort in Khao Lak when the tsunami hit.

"The only reason we survived was because of the locals. Even when they helped us safely reach the Phuket airport last year, their only parting words were: 'Please come again'," he said.

So, the Haltmeyers did – this time with several volunteers and a hoard of

200,000 euros (\$398,100).

"When we reached home, the only thought on our mind was to give something back to the large-hearted people of Thailand," said Mrs Haltmeyer.

Hence, the 16 friends came together to form a relief organisation named *Flutopferhilfe Khao Lak* (loosely translated as "Tide Victims Assistance Khao Lak").

Having travelled back to the badly-damaged region in June last year to distribute food, clothing and household items, the group also sponsored the education of 42 children at 70 euros per child per year.

The Haltmeyer family themselves sponsored three children, whom they consider additions to their family.

"I cannot wait to come back to Thailand in the future and see how my new children have been faring," said Mrs Haltmeyer.

"We had to keep our promise to the Thai people. I am so proud of the way they are rebuilding their lives," added Mr Haltmeyer, fighting back tears.

TRAINING THE TRAINERS

With tourist arrivals increasing steadily, officials said Thailand is well on its road to recovery.

"There was a 90-per-cent drop in international arrivals to Phuket immediately after the tsunami," said Ms Eumporn Jiragalwisul, director (Singapore, Indonesia and Philippines) of the Tourism Authority of Thailand.

"With most damaged areas now rebuilt, that drop now stands at 50 per cent. In fact, hotel occupancy rates were at 80 per cent during the recent festive season."

Another priority is empowering locals and helping them get on with their lives, said Lt Gen Amnat Barlee, director of the Thai Red Cross Society.

"We are deploying trained helpers in various tsunami-hit areas to help people cope with its practical and psychological effects," said Lt Gen Barlee, adding they were currently in the process of "training the trainers".

These helpers will have a wide spectrum of duties, ranging from being a life-guard to a counsellor.

"It is an honour for me to be selected to serve my nation," said 32-year-old Virote Niratvattanasai, who is currently undergoing training to be a government helper.

"And if need be, I would jump into the water to save lives if another tsunami hits. *Nam jai khon Thai* – it is in our Thai blood to help others."

In Iraq, a bloody question mark

BAGHDAD – Even as deadly attacks killed more than 170 people in Iraq in just two days, a top United States general said violence in the country should decline this year. But the bloodshed has raised further doubts about Iraq's political stability.

"(As) more Iraqis want a peaceful solution and see the benefit of their government, there'll be fewer places for the terrorists to take refuge," General Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said. "So I believe the violence will subside over the course of the year."

On Thursday, about 130 people were killed in a series of attacks – including two

devastating suicide bombings in the holy city of Karbala and in Ramadi. An attack also took place the previous day in Mukdadiyah, north of Baghdad. The incidents have fuelled sectarian tensions and taken the death toll to over 170 in 48 hours.

The largest Shia party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, denounced the minority Sunnis for inciting the violence after faring poorly at the polls.

Reinforcing fears of a civil war, they said some factions may take direct action because the US-led coalition was "hampering" attempts by the government to combat the insurgents. — **AGENCIES**

GLOBAL ROUNDUP

TEH TARIK DOES NOT LEAD TO STROKE

The Health Ministry has refuted an earlier news report that said Malaysians were prone to stroke due to their obsession with *teh tarik*, the *New Straits Times* reported.

Health Minister Chua Soi Lek denied that the big dose of condensed milk in *teh tarik* was a main factor in stroke. But he said increased consumption of condensed milk could lead to diabetes. The leading causes of stroke are high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes and smoking.

CHINA, JAPAN TO HOLD TALKS

Japan and China will hold one-day talks next Monday in Beijing on bilateral ties and

a dispute over gas deposits in the East China Sea, the Japanese Foreign Ministry said. Tensions between the Asian rivals have risen over the past year, particularly over the Japanese prime minister's visits to a Tokyo war shrine that China considers a glorification of militarism. — **AP**

WHAT REALLY GOES ON IN A BROTHEL

A German theatre company has said that it will stage a play in a Berlin brothel designed to focus attention on "what really happens" in the world of prostitution. After two performances of the play, called *Joy Services*, two madams will discuss the work of sex workers. — **AFP**