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From ID to counselling, a one-stop body shop

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From the macabre chaos in the days after the tsunami, dealing with the dead has now become a corporate venture in Thailand, with the opening of a one-stop body centre run by American disaster specialists.

Countries with citizens lost or killed in the tsunami disaster, including Australia, have hired a private company, Kenyon International Emergency Services, to care for bodies during the identification process and then send them home.

Yesterday workers were putting the final touches on the Kenyon International Repatriation Centre, where the remains of foreign victims will be held and embalmed if necessary.

The company has also built a 75-metre-long wall on which visiting foreign families will be encouraged to hang mementoes. The wall will be divided by flags from 34 nations and will be a way of commemorating the dead during the six to 12 months it may take to properly identify bodies.

The site was chosen because of its proximity to Phuket International Airport. Yesterday it was almost ready to receive bodies from several temple-based morgues.

Inside a fenced-off area amid rows of palm trees are 20 container-sized freezers, 10 mortuary tables and stacks of coffins, including a pile of child-sized coffins.

Disasters, or "incidents", are the bread and butter of Kenyon, which has more than 80 people working in Thailand. The company, started in 1929 by a London funeral director, specialises in recovery of bodies, emergency call centres, counselling, crisis logistics and forensic matters. It promises clients, such as governments, to do the work that would otherwise lead to staff having post-traumatic stress disorders.

Kenyon, which has an office and portable morgue in Sydney, has worked through a catalogue of terrible misfortune, crisis and violence, including the September 11 attacks, the Bali bombing, plane crashes and recovering bodies from mass graves in the Balkans and Iraq. Lately, terrorism

has kept the company gainfully employed. "Unfortunately it does seem to be busier," said Robert Jensen, Kenyon's president and chief operating officer.

Mr Jensen said Kenyon had seen nothing quite like the scale of the tsunami disaster.

But it was not the worst "incident" for sheer numbers of bodies, he said. The company was working on mass graves in the Balkans war where 20,000 people were buried (of the tsunami-affected areas Kenyon is only working in Thailand, where the toll was probably much less than 10,000).

Disaster management seems a rather unattractive business. But Mr Jensen says his employees know what they are getting into. "This is the life we have chosen. Our people go in with a different level of preparation. It's not about us; we are there to help make something so horrible easier for the families. And that's what this centre is really for."

The repatriation centre is not just for foreigners. If Thai families wanted their loved ones sent somewhere overseas, Kenyon will take care of it. Mr Jensen says countries that do not have contracts with Kenyon will have to make their own arrangements with the storing bodies and flying them home. He declined to talk about the cost of repatriation.