



U.S. Company Aims to Identify Tsunami Victims

By Jenny Paris Dow Jones Newswires

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PHUKET, Thailand -- Outside the Yanyao temple in Phangnga, Thailand, where bodies of thousands of victims of last month's tsunami lie in a makeshift morgue, a sign reads, "We will bring everyone home."

Fulfilling that pledge could take well over a year, though, estimates Kenyon International Emergency Services Inc., a Houston disaster-management company brought in to help identify and repatriate the bodies.

The task is hindered by the sheer scale of the disaster, and Thai authorities' eagerness to move quickly with identification may have complicated the process. Hoping to have remains sent home and its tourist areas back in business within a few months, Thailand welcomed nearly every foreign forensic and disaster-victim-identification team that offered to help. The result has been a fragmented operation, with more than two-dozen teams working in makeshift morgues at various sites, using different sets of standards and, of course, different languages.

"At some point, there were about 30 different [disaster-victim-identification] teams working here," said Robert Jensen, Kenyon's president. "They're all pretty skilled people, but having a lot of people doesn't necessarily help. What you need is a common set of very high standards."

Although the Thai government declined any international financial assistance for the disaster, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was quick to accept help with the identification effort as fast-decomposing bodies began piling up. Taking up Australia's offer to pick up the tab, the Thai government brought in Kenyon within 48 hours of the Dec. 26 disaster.

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The company's job is to help match forensics data collected from the mortuary, such as dental information, fingerprints and DNA samples, with data provided by families of the deceased. Once a positive match is established and local authorities issue a death certificate, Kenyon repatriates the bodies, including provision of the necessary documentation and, if desired, arrangements for religious rites ahead of repatriation or funeral services back home.

The company, a subsidiary of funeral operator Service Corp. International, says it has deployed two of its three mobile mortuary kits, and has more than 80 people in southern Thailand, with plans to replace them on a rotation basis. Kenyon estimates it will spend "several million dollars" on the operation, but wouldn't reveal the cost or size of its contract with the Australian government.

The tsunami killed some 5,300 people in Thailand alone, nearly half of whom were foreigners, and 3,500 are missing. More than 4,000 bodies remain unidentified.

Kenyon, whose efforts here are focused specifically on non-Thai casualties, offers a variety of services in disaster response and recovery. For companies such as airlines, it provides crisis-communications training and preparation for a possible mass fatality. In addition to aiding identification and repatriation, it helps families get to a site, returns victims' personal effects and runs an international call center.

Kenyon is one of a handful of companies that offer disaster-related services, says Jerry Novasad, Kenyon's vice president of operations. "But none offer the full range of services we do," he said. In addition to plane crashes and the Sept. 11, 2001, destruction of the World Trade Center, Kenyon provided services after the bombings of a nightclub on the Indonesian island of Bali in 2002 and the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, Iraq, in 2003.

—Ann Zimmerman in Dallas contributed to this article.

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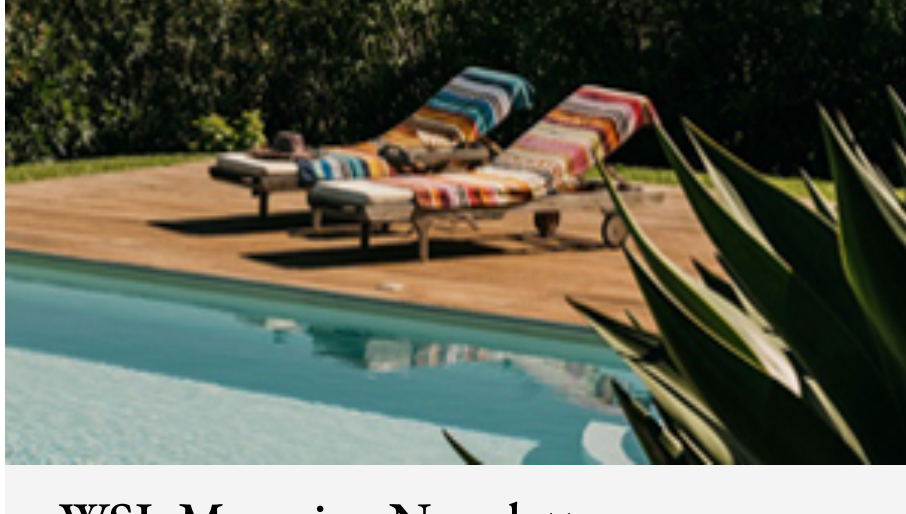
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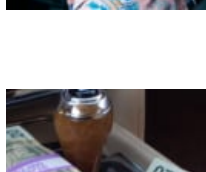
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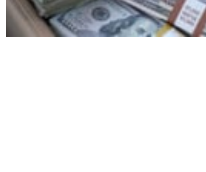
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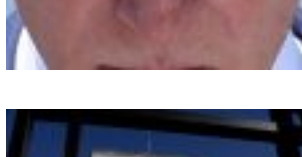



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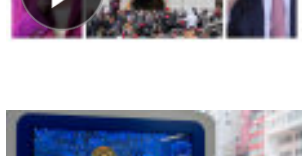

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