

Tsunami - Andaman - 2004

“What’s Wrong With the SEA?”



"I came here - the Andaman and Nicobar Islands - on 2nd December 2004 for an expedition related to HAM Radio, and what I experienced was unexpected. The events turned out in such a way that I now believe that I have been sent here in a pre-planned way by the Almighty"

Sarath – VU3RSB

It was 26th December 2004, the day after Christmas, and my DXpedition operating was progressing right through the previous night. The time was around half past six in the morning. I was in contact with JA1PVX on PSK31 until 6.15 and, after few seconds, the table, bed and everything in the room began moving very heavily. I was under the impression that the students in the dormitory were kidding me and I looked around. There was nobody. I took a deep breath and the shaking increased; this time it was with so much more intensity that I was unable to hold the keyboard or the laptop.



Suddenly, I was afraid and the thought "earthquake" flashed in my mind. Without a second thought, I shouted out loud "Earthquake!" All the students of the Polytechnic, who enjoyed the Christmas holiday till late last night, were in deep sleep. There were around one hundred students. I got them up, and started running downstairs taking two and three steps at a time, thinking about the consequences, the aftermath and what to do now. I was worried about the radio equipment and concerned about my duty to set up communications for relief.

When I landed on the ground floor, I found it was getting difficult for me to stand on my own two feet. I was unable to keep myself standing; the earth below my feet was like a wave. I was sure and certain that it is going to be a big calamity; the intensity and the shaking had not stopped even after few minutes and it was increasing.

Suddenly I started worried about Bharathi, VU2RBI and the other team members. While thinking about them, I looked at the building and it was shaking like a large coconut tree. The scene of the shaking building sent shivers into my body and I started getting a kind of vomiting sensation. I clutched my head with both hands, closed my eyes and waited for a few seconds. The intensity is getting reduced.

And then I saw Jose Jacob, VU2JOS and Ramu, VU2DVO, who were monitoring in a house nearby, come running towards the building. Shouting at them they looked my way and we met each other. I enquired about Bharathi. At 6.55 am, I contacted her on VHF and her voice on the handheld has assured me of her safety. She was already in touch with several HAM stations around the world. The news of earthquake was being sent through HAM Radio within seconds. I tried to get Mohan, VU2MYH and Mr. Prashant, SWL, who were operating at another corner of the Island but I was unable to contact them.

Luckily my cellphone had dialtone after few seconds. Immediately I called my hometown - Guntur in Andhra Pradesh, on mainland India and connected with my brother. They were not aware of the earthquake.

It was about 7.15 am when I sensed a few more tremors below my feet. People around me started coming out of their houses in groups and started staying outside.



An hour afterwards there was news that the level of the sea was increasing around Port Blair. Water was flooding the Island, and we could see one paddy field area was engulfed with seawater... two kilometers inland! The local station of All India Radio, AIR, was announcing that the danger was over and there was nothing more to worry about. The news was received on our walkie-talkie, which could pick up the local TV channel also.

AIR also announced that a high level meeting would be held around 8.00 am at Secretariat building under the chairmanship of the Lt. Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

At this point the power suddenly went out and we understood that seawater surrounded the Government Circuit House, the generator plant. The local government advised the people not to venture into that area.

I then thought that we needed to get into the act in a different way. This was clearly a catastrophe but the intensity was not known at that time. So we decided to go and meet the officials informing them about our availability to assist.

At 8.30 am when we are on the way to the Secretariat, we saw that the increased sea level had indeed changed the entire physical picture of the area. There were two Jetties which were getting damaged by powerful waves, and people vacated their hotels, houses, roadways, etc. I thought that I should take one or two snapshots and did.

At this time nobody was aware this kind of sea wave is called Tsunami. Everybody was of the opinion that it was simply a quake.



At 9.00 am, we located Mohan and he informed us that they visited the Science Center. They returned to Circuit House and were ready to go to Secretariat. We took a motorcycle and visited the Government Secretariat and informed the officials there about our availability for any emergency operations. There they

informed us that the earthquake was a 8.50 on the Richter Scale and that its epicenter was near Sumatra. Also we learned that all flights were running and telephone lines were working. They were sure the worst was over, but would contact us if needed.

While Mr. Mohan and I were travelling to Science Center, he told me about the incidents at the seashore and how the waves were damaging both the beach and the vehicles parked there. I suggested that we go there and take some photographs. When we reached the seaside, it was unusually calm and everything was so silent. I started taking photographs when suddenly the seawater started increasing with tremendous speed. Mohan begged me to stop shooting and said we should run for our lives. As I was taking photos of rising waves and the sea, we climbed aboard the motorcycle and Mohan started the engine. While seated on the moving bike, I turned towards the sea and started shooting more pictures. At that moment, one huge wave about 20 meters high came towards us... and we just narrowly escaped from its clutches. Later I took video of the waves and the sea once we reached a safe distance.



We met Bharathi and others at the Hotel Sinclair and discussed the situation. By that time she was getting messages to be conveyed to mainland India and Islands. We took our equipment and turned our antennas, which were pointed to USA, towards India. The information we were getting from Radio and TV was slowly getting dramatic as well as depressing. Our HF/VHF nets were giving information about

the unprecedented damage of the Sri Lanka, Chennai, Cuddalore, Nagapattinam and Ongole in Andhra Pradesh, etc.

At that time the team made the decision to terminate the HAM expedition and convert to emergency relief communications.



I went to All India Radio and Doordarshan TV along with Jose and handed-over a letter confirming our availability for any situation at around 1.30 and started handling the traffic on HF. While we were taking lunch there was another big tremor, a 7 on the Richter scale. Immediately, we brought out the mobile antenna and erected the emergency station on the lawn of the hotel and we were assisted by Mohan and Mr. Prashant.

Once the antenna was ready and setup was working, we contacted Mrs. Nirmala, VU2MYN from National Institute of Amateur Radio Head Quarters, Hyderabad. There were calls from stations from Kerala, Kolkota and other foreign stations from Thailand, Australia, South Africa, etc.



It was an unforgettable day for everyone. No power, no water... it was horrible. The continuous tremors and fear of rising sea levels was giving us sleepless moments. At around 1.00 am I got an inquiry from Kerala that a Middle East Radio station was inquiring about the casualties in Andaman. They asked for our confirmation of 1000 casualties. We got it clarified from the Government press and informed them that it was not true. Keeping in contact with mainland India became an around-the-clock operation.



The next day, we erected a better antenna and also contacted the Deputy Commissioner of the Andamans. Meanwhile, there was an inquiry from the Mumbai press about the number of casualties of Army personnel. By that time, Mohan and Mr. Prashant set up a station at the Deputy Commissioner's office. There were more tremors and many people were running and shouting causing disturbances.



We heard the news that Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, VU2SON made visits to Car Nicobar along with senior Ministers and swift decisions followed. There was information

that Mohan and Ramu were to setup communications on the Car Nicobar Islands at the request of the Government-tomorrow morning. The next day, after some difficulty due to the communication gap, both left for Car Nicobar on board an Air Force plane. There was lot to be done for immediate rescue & relief let alone rehabilitation.

By 3 pm we contacted Mohan and Ramu on forty meters. We understood that the situation was very pathetic... there were no roads, no modes of transportation remaining. So they started sending the messages to everyone concerned. Relief material, food and water, medical assistance, reconstruction equipment... everything had to be noted and conveyed to the concerned departments at the Andaman & Nicobar governmental headquarters as well as to the mainland.

During the afternoon of 30th December, knowing that a great many people wanted to return to the mainland, we went to the Port Office to find out about traveling by ship to the mainland and to book the tickets for the VU4 Team members. But by that time there was a big rumor that the sea level was raising again and another Tsunami was in the offing. Every one was in a panic; everything was topsy-turvy... people running, children crying and vehicles being driven without any aim and destination. Ironically, those rumors had caused a real emergency once again.



Seeing all this, my colleague Mr. Prashant totally lost his control and self

confidence and was determined to return to the mainland. It was another major job to put him on the flight and keep him in control.

On 31st December, the Dy. Commissioner informed us of the need for another station in Hut Bay. Jose was sent by sea to set it up. It took the Indian Naval ship two days to reach the destination and find a safe landing site and, until we received his 59+ signals, it was a nightmare for every one concerned. In fact, the actual time of travel was about only 8 hours; the trip took 48 hours due to bad weather and berthing problems because the port there was severely damaged. Jose traveled on the first ship after Tsunami which was carrying survival rations for the people stranded there. He passed hundreds of welfare and official messages daily... other communications systems were not working.

Also on the 31st, we had another meeting again with officials who said they did not have communications with other islands and needed more operators. By that time NIAR HQ was ready with men and material. The GIAR Team, made up of Govt. officials and sponsored by the Gujarat State government, was ready.

An exhausted Bharathi left Port Blair for Chennai early morning on January 1st as was scheduled earlier. By that time the relief NIAR team came from Hyderabad and, along with local hams from Chennai, met her in Chennai Airport. She left after few hours for her home in Delhi while the NIAR Team made their arrangements to fly on to Port Blair.

I had a meeting with those in charge of communications for the Islands, i.e. Principal of the Polytechnic, the Relief Commissioner, etc. Around 15 more Ham members were coming and we made proper plans for their operations.



Ram, VU2LIC operated from Dy. Commissioners Office, Port Blair while Mr. Sushil, VU2LFA was the communicator at the Andaman Public Works District Office. Satya VU2DSV and Chitanya, VU3MCK were airlifted to Car Nicobar by the Air Force and where they operated from the Dy. Commissioner's Office.



Meanwhile, Mohan and Ramu moved to the badly damaged Muse Jetty in Car Nicobar. It was the only place to receive relief material by sea. They could see one ship anchored and awaiting for permission to berth. The master of ship approached them in a small boat and looking for the Port communication team and the missing jetty staff. There was no one else except our team. They wanted to get approvals from Port Blair and they had no means of communication. Mohan relayed this information to me and told me to contact Chairman Dilleswar Rao of the Port Blair Port Trust who knew us. The Chairman immediately gave instructions to anchor in the jetty.



There was a lot of media coverage of our activities. Our people also met many officials. On January 8th, the Honorable Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh visited tsunami-affected areas around Port Blair. The VU4 team members received special permission to meet him. The PM praised the HAM fraternity for their services and also encouraged us to keep up the good work. He informed us that he will promote our hobby which he believed necessary for disaster communications.

Although another ham team came from Bangalore to Port Blair, sponsored by Action Aid, their services could not be utilized because most of the key sites were already staffed and, in some areas, non-ham communications were partially restored. They returned to the mainland immediately.



The GIAR team operated for a short time from Campbell Bay and Teresa Island. They passed messages about relief material etc. and were in touch with me.

In the early morning of 10th January,

Jose returned from Hut Bay. That day water level increased due to high tide season. Ram, Jose and Sushil left for Chennai with an Air Force Cargo plane.

After the arrival of our four Car Nicobar team members, we left for Chennai by a commercial flight, sending all our equipment, antennas etc. by courier.



At Chennai, the local hams Sheik, VU2SDU, Deepan, VU2DPN and Das, VU2DH honored us at the airport and we returned to Hyderabad by bus.



After reaching NIAR Headquarters, we briefed the Chairman, Suri, VU2MY about our activities. Suri also hosted lunch for us at the Country Club. That marked beginning of the VU4 Team's long awaited Rest & Recuperation after more than a month of intense hamming that started with the successful Dxpedition making tens of thousands of contacts and ended with passing thousands of emergency messages after the Tsunami.