For many of us, December 26, 2004, began in a sleepy, post-holiday haze. Maybe you spent the day lining up gifts to be returned or munching on some leftover sugar cookies. Perhaps you just took advantage of a quiet Sunday at home, thankful the rush was over and you could just relax.

No matter how you spent the day, though, eventually that peace was shattered when you switched on the television or the computer and were confronted immediately with the devastation that was unfolding on the other side of the world. Everywhere the headline blared: Tsunami Strikes Southeast Asia: Death Toll in the Thousands.

The images that followed during the next hours and days are seared into memory: dazed toddlers separated from their parents, battered tourists clinging to life atop trees and buildings, and, of course, the thousands of dead and missing, their loved ones overcome with grief as days wore on with no hope. The situation quickly went from grim to dismal to hopeless.

And amid the early devastation and the unfathomable body counts, warnings began to surface that another kind of storm was not far behind. This particular enemy could wipe out thousands more people than the tsunami and, worse, could stretch far beyond the immediate areas, triggering a global public health crisis.

The only way to stop this second wave of impending doom: Water. Pure, clean, drinkable water. It was a daunting task, bringing clean water to an area utterly destroyed by the tsunami. Even in the most developed areas, the infrastructure to deliver fresh water was gone. The options were few … until flickers of hope began lighting up, clear across the world, in the Lisle, Ill., office of the Water Quality Association.

DESIRED TO HELP

WQA is a trade association made up of 2,400 worldwide company members representing the household, commercial, industrial and small system water treatment industry. It was founded in 1974 following the merger of two predecessor organizations, the Water Conditioning Foundation and the Water Conditioning Association International, and it now represents both manufacturers and dealers.

The mission of the WQA is “to unify the industry, promote the individual right to quality water, the dissemination of water quality information, and the growth of the water quality improvement industry. Activities, programs, and services are designed to enable the industry to perform with the greatest economy and efficiency and to provide the greatest service to the public. Our focus is on industry issues, education, and idea exchange.”

WQA Executive Director Peter J. Censky says that like most people, he initially watched the tsunami story unfold on television, first talking to friends and family about the devastation. “But in the back of my mind, I’m thinking I’ve got to do something — I’m in a position where I can do something,” he says.

It seems many WQA members had the same thought. Within two days, members began contacting him and WQA’s executive editor/communications John Ferguson to find out what they could do to help. With a membership that ranges from the major water product manufacturers — like Maytag, Brita and Pur — to the smallest mom-and-pop dealers, the challenge was to respond to these requests in an appropriate way for both the type of member and the situation.

“Every association is different,” Censky says. “In our case, we’re in the water improvement business and we’re worldwide, so when this occurred, our companies looked at themselves in
the mirror and said, "If we don't get involved in this, then what the hell are we doing in this business?"

He spoke to then-QWA Board President Greg Norgard, who told him to do whatever was necessary. So in turn he mobilized his staff with the same message. Do what needs to be done.

For the first week or two, as many as four people on the 32-member QWA staff worked around the tsunami effort at any one time. Ferguson estimates he spent 20 hours a day the first week, 10 the next and a little bit less each week thereafter. Aside from staff time, though, there was little impact on the QWA's $4.4 million annual budget yet the efforts still produced big results.

Of course, it's one thing to want to get involved, but it's another matter entirely figuring out how to do it. That's where having an association with worldwide resources and contacts came into play. Luckily, several QWA members already had relationships with companies in the affected areas. Those contacts were the primary source for figuring out what needed to be done.

"People called me and said, 'What's the strategy? What should we be doing?'", says Ferguson. "I operationalized the phone with a number of them to try to figure out what would be the smartest way our members could have something to contribute."

ABILITY TO HELP

First, QWA sent e-mails to members in that region and quickly determined that most of the communications had been destroyed. The next step was to relay information through the people on the ground. So manufacturers who had contacts nearby—not in the affected areas relayed information through those individuals. We were working to talk to people on the ground about what was needed.

At the same time, QWA contacted Water For People, a Denver-based international development organization with which it had worked in the past on funding efforts. Nancy Hawe, WFP's communications director, says QWA was certainly not the only group wondering where to go next.

"We were first six to seven weeks from the media, our donor base, manufacturers, the general public—they all wanted to help and wanted us to be the conduit with Southeast Asia," she says.

WFP determined quickly that the best thing to do was make sure everybody was disseminating the same information and had quick access to it. The result was the formation in early January of an association of international nongovernmental organizations and professional individuals to share expertise and minimize duplication efforts in working on the crisis.

The consortium included WQA and WFP, as well as American Water Works Association, Water Environment Federation, Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies, National Association of Water Companies, Association of Metropolitan Sewerage Agencies and International Water Association. The groups agreed to "maintain a consistent message in order to deal with the media and the numerous specific requests from international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), local NGOs, communities and host government organizations."

Water and sanitation are the most fundamental of all needs for all humans and every living thing. You have to have water or you die," Hawe says. "Instead of reinventing the wheel, we got together and decided to gather the information. Each one brings a different expertise to the table. So many ad hoc committees and partnerships that are formed are nothing more than smoke and mirrors. For a partnership to work, each member has to bring some specific expertise and accountability to the table."

Through this partnership with WFP, members of the QWA now had an outlet for sending equipment or money specifically earmarked for water restoration in the tsunami-affected areas. Ferguson estimates WQA members donated in excess of $10,000 to WFP and other relief agencies, though he stresses that it's hard to quantify because many of the member companies have a dozen or more branches, which in turn employ thousands more people, so it's impossible to know just how many people gave money, either on their own or through a workplace campaign.

Ferguson's relief effort unfolded this way:

• Tier One: Immediately after the event, getting survivors to safety and treating the injured. The consortium members were not yet part of the response at this stage.

• Tier Two: And using the Tier One efforts, the only response was bottled water because the infrastructure was completely wiped out. But coincidentally, a QWA member had tested a product in India just a week before the tsunami that uses a powder to decontaminate water. The powder is added to a liter of water, shaken, and the contaminants fall to the bottom and the remaining water becomes drinkable. The product was dropped into even the most remote areas where helicopters couldn't reach.

• Tier Three: A semi-permanent system. This is where QWA members really pulled together. Some of them sent large portable treatment units, which are self-contained units powered by gasoline, kerosene or electricity, if available. They can be set up in a matter of minutes. In one instance, Eureka Forbes has a 70 percent market share in residential water treatment in India and has service and support infrastructure throughout the region. The company readily committed the necessary logistics support, transportation and people. On Dec. 30, 2004, the WQA provided facilities for Zenon, World Vision and Eureka Forbes to hold the first of many daily conference calls to coordinate efforts.

"The main thing we found out was that the tsunami had poured seawater into wells, rendering them useless. It also overwhelmed municipal drinking water plants and ripped up distribution networks. Based on this information, World Vision determined that the relief camps away from the worst destruction would be the main focus. Displaced persons in the camps were receiving some bottled water from donors, but many were drinking untreated water that was being trucked in and stored in large containers.

The hard part about any relief effort is being sure what is donated is truly needed. We had to have an accurate picture of the situation on the ground before we tied up valuable resources and took up precious space and time for delivery to the region. We also needed to be sure we had the infrastructure on the ground to keep the water flowing where it was most needed.

Once we knew what we were going to have to deal with, the Zenon Homespring units became a very viable option. These self-contained cylindrical units, which stand less than 6 feet high, make water biologically safe for consumption, without chemicals, by physically removing suspended solids, viruses, parasites and bacteria from the water. The portable units also are simple to operate and easy to service, which was key because we had no idea when additional flights into the area would be available for spare parts. They were even modified to operate without electricity.

The plan was to send 45 Zenon Homespring units to India and nine to Sri Lanka. The Indian units were flown to Chennai in cargo space donated by Gulf Airlines; the Sri Lanka units were flown to Colombo in cargo space supplied by Air India Airlines. The units were all received in Asia by January 11 — only 12 days after the project launched.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Local knowledge and representation is essential in any relief effort. This project could not have been completed without Zenon Forbes' assistance and knowledge of the bureaucratic requirements.

2. Matching local conditions with the appropriate technology is critical. Our units were relatively portable, simple to operate, and can be modified to function without electricity. These made them well suited for this mission.

3. An industry association like the QWA is most valuable when it provides an information and contacts clearinghouse for members who have the right resources to benefit the victims of a natural disaster.

I am happy to report that all of the water treatment units installed to-date by Zenon and Eureka Forbes are functioning and providing water to displaced communities in India. When community rehabilitation efforts are completed, these units will be re-deployed to schools and communities with the greatest need for safe drinking water.

Finally, I want to thank everyone, including Mr. P.J. Reddy, Dr. S. Muridha Rao, and Mr. S.K. Sankar from Eureka Forbes Limited, who led the relief efforts in India and Mr. Ryan of Abans Limited, Sri Lanka, who spearheaded projects there.

"Our job is not to think about delivering a piece of equipment to a port; it's to think about the logistics in between. We had members on the ground in those regions, and we were able to talk to people directly in some of the affected areas within a day or two," — PeterJ. Cesky, Executive Director, Water Quality Association.
REACH ACROSS THE WORLD

The staff of the National Groundwater Association had just returned from a very successful annual meeting and were enjoying the quiet days between holidays when the tsunami struck southeast Asia. Cliff Treyens, director of public awareness, knew the association had a role to play as clean water became a central issue in the disaster, but the challenge was how to respond quickly and appropriately.

"It was clear from media reports pretty quickly that there already were serious problems with the lack of fresh water — people were drinking out of ditches," Treyens says. "We knew that the need would immediately exceed the abilities or capabilities of relief organizations to address it."

The association, headquartered in Westerville, Ohio, includes a range of groundwater experts, from geologists and hydrologists and engineers to groundwater contractors, manufacturers, and suppliers of ground water-related products and services. Formerly the National Water Well Association, its membership includes more than 15,000 professionals around the world.

Treyens and his organization — working with a skeleton holiday crew — decided to put together an emergency well disinfection field guide that could be disseminated electronically to anyone who needed it. The document contains a simple five-step system of disinfection that uses bleach or powdered calcium hypochlorite. It also included two charts showing how much of the chemicals to add to the water, and was useful for both the shallow and wide-hand-dug wells as well as the bow and deep drilled wells.

"Dr. S. Murulidhar Rao of Eureka Forbes participated in the inauguration of the system installed in Nirmalakhanpur, India. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Lissem of Zenon Environmental.

A girl drinks a cup of clean water in the village of Kharikhawa, Nagpur, India. Photo courtesy of Nandy J. Holten, Water for People.

The tsunami relocation camp in Nagapattinam, India. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Lissem of Zenon Environmental.

Life goes on around the installation of a Zenon Decom Water Filter unit in Nagapattinam, India. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Lissem of Zenon Environmental.

The JUNE 2005 SIGNATURE STORY will focus on a regional trade associ- ation's crucial involvement with a huge coalition of over 30 other organi- zations. Learn how the coalition was formed and how to many groups banded together to successfully block registration — a supplement to word- ers' compensation — that would have seriously affected their mem- bers and consumers. The coalition still thrives today, addressing potential reforms to workers' comp. The Mechanical Contractors Association of Chicago, Ill., is a 501 (c)6 with just 67 members, seven staff and a budget of $2.1 million. Visit mca.org for additional information.