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Dec 31, 2004

### Want to help the victims? Cash is best

**Shipping of food and clothing takes time and is costly - and items may not meet needs**

**By Theresa Tan and Yap Su Yin**

RELIEF agencies have learnt the hard way that the best intentions of generous people who want to help in a tragedy do not always have the desired results.

That is why the Singapore Red Cross and international relief agencies now say, if you really want to help in a crisis like the tsunami tragedy, give cash.

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**SUPPLIES HELP...:** Medical supplies such as disinfectant and bandages arrive in Sri Lanka as aid workers in the coastal town of Galle organise their distribution to affected areas. - AFP

The Singapore Red Cross began its policy of collecting cash only after the 1999 Turkey earthquake which killed about 17,000 people and left hundreds of thousands homeless.

Singaporeans gave two container-load of clothes which reached the victims only about 40 days after the disaster. It had taken more than a month to collect, sort, pack and ship.

'The people didn't receive our clothes very enthusiastically,' said its manager of International Services Lim Theam Poh.

People also donated food items, but the food was not what the victims were used to eating. And some items had pork, which Muslim Turks cannot eat.

Cash donations allow relief agencies to meet the needs of victims better.

Red Cross chairman Winston Choo said yesterday: 'At this stage, we are not sure exactly what the needs are. The affected

countries themselves are not quite organised or ready to receive.

'For us to send things that they don't already need will be counter-productive. So we ask for money, so that when we know what we can do, we can use the money to buy things.'

United States President George W. Bush gave Americans similar advice, saying cash donations would help organisations 'focus resources and assets to meet specific needs'.

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**...BUT CASH IS BEST:**  
Employees of the Jakarta Stock Exchange opening a donation box for Indonesian victims.

'A lot of times, Americans, in their desire to help, will send blankets or clothes. That may be necessary, but to me it makes more sense to send cash,' he said yesterday.

Others that also prefer cash, not kind, are Care, a humanitarian organisation active in 70 countries, and International Rescue Committee, a relief group active in 25 countries, Reuters reported.

'It's too expensive to ship stuff abroad. Then, the logistics of getting goods to the site are often very complicated,' said Care spokesman Lurma Rackley.

Relief group Oxfam International accepts goods but prefers cash.

It has many stories about inappropriate offers. 'We received donations of high-heel shoes for East Timor,' said Oxfam official Caroline Green in a Reuters report. 'Cash enables us to scale up quickly, buy needed equipment and start getting out relief.'

Singapore Red Cross vice-chairman Jeffrey Chan said that by buying medical supplies, rice and clothes from the country itself, 'we not only support that country's industries, but cuts down the cost of sorting, storage, customs and transport'.

The Sri Lankan and Indonesian embassies in Singapore, overwhelmed by the deluge of supplies donated, are also asking for cash.

'We can't afford more containers to take the donations to Sri Lanka,' said a Sri Lankan Embassy spokesman.

Indonesian diplomat Chalief Akbar said: 'It's easier to channel these funds to buy medical and relief supplies over there.'

SriLankan Airlines has also stopped accepting donations in kind temporarily because of the 'staggering supplies'.

Mr Jan Egeland, the United Nations emergency relief coordinator for the tsunami disaster, said that there are also different needs at different times.

Often, relief workers find after four or five weeks that they have too much of some supplies that they do not need at all, and are desperately short of other things that are not arriving quickly enough.

Unicef Executive Director Carol Bellamy said that in the first stage of tsunami relief work, getting safe water supplies is critical.

So water purification tablets and oral re-hydration salts to combat diarrhoea are a priority.

Sanitation facilities and food, medical supplies and shelter equipment, such as tents and blankets, are also given in the first stage.

Then, the various aid agencies will address the longer-term needs for a more permanent shelter, education, psychological support and replacing lost livelihood of entire communities.

Disaster relief professionals also advise those keen to volunteer in the afflicted countries to reconsider.

'Unless you can go there and be effective, don't go. You will drain local resources, which are already stretched,' said Red Cross' Mr Chan.

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