

England nurse
their bruises

Mike Selvey in Sport



How natural disasters
can change the world

Simon Winchester in G2

Where have all
the physics
teachers gone?

In Education

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The Guardian

Blair back as UK death toll soars

Government faces growing criticism over response to disaster and hints a new increase in aid

Jamie Wilson and
David Hencke

The British death toll from the tsunami disaster rose dramatically yesterday with Jack Straw, the foreign secretary, warning that nearly 200 people from the UK were "highly likely" to have perished in the waves that struck the Indian Ocean on Boxing Day.

The number of Britons confirmed dead stands at 40, but Mr Straw said 159 others were still unaccounted for, mostly in Thailand's holiday resorts.

The death toll across the region is estimated to be more than 140,000, but the predicted number of British fatalities alone is higher than for almost any peacetime disaster in living memory, dwarfing the 67 killed in the September 11 attacks.

Mr Straw was speaking as opposition leaders and victims' families stepped up criticism of the way the government has handled the disaster.

Tony Blair flew back from Egypt yesterday after criticism from the Liberal Democrat leader, Charles Kennedy, and the Tory leader, Michael Howard, for not cutting short his holiday when the true scale of events in Asia became known.

Downing Street said he immediately went into meetings with John Prescott, the deputy prime minister, about the disaster.

Defending the prime minister, Mr Straw said he had kept in the closest possible touch with ministers.

"The question for the British media and public is: is there a single thing the British government could and should have done that it has not done, notwithstanding the fact the prime minister is abroad? The answer is no."

Earlier Mr Kennedy said that if he had been in Mr Blair's position he would have come home earlier. He accused the government of scrambling to catch up with public opinion, which had immediately grasped the seriousness of the situation.

In response Mr Straw said the government was "almost certain" to match the more than £60m donated by the public to the disaster appeal, and revealed that he would be making a personal donation, although he refused to say how much.

He dismissed suggestions that it had taken too long to confirm the figure for the number of missing Britons,



Thai police officers separate out personal effects recovered from the tourist resort Koh Phi Phi. Personal details have been electronically obscured Photograph: Kin Cheung/Reuters

Guardian appeal
tops £660,000



The Guardian Christmas charity appeal continues to grow at a record pace thanks to the generosity of our readers. By last night over £660,000 had been pledged.

Money for the tsunami disaster is being raised with the support of our international charity partner Concern, a member of the Disasters Emergency Committee. All funds will be channelled to the committee, which is overseeing relief efforts.

Donations can still be made to the two causes highlighted before the earthquake struck: Concern's long-term work in Asia and Africa to reduce the cycle of hunger, and the tackling of poverty and isolation among older people in the UK.

Those wishing to make a donation can phone 0800 0839921, go online — at guardian.co.uk/christmasappeal — or complete the postal coupon on page 20.

saying officials had learned from other disasters that initial death tolls were often too high, alarming some families unnecessarily.

"Because many of the bodies of the dead may sadly never be found, firm estimates of casualty figures remain difficult," he said.

Mr Straw also said the government was contributing money towards the cost of travelling to south-east Asia for victims' relatives, as well as the repatriation of remains.

Scotland Yard has supplied 113 family liaison officers to assist the bereaved, while 43 police officers from across the UK are helping to identify bodies in the affected countries.

The majority of the missing Britons were on holiday in Thailand, when the authorities yesterday asked foreign

families and friends of the missing to stay away from the tsunami-hit areas — including temporary morgues in Buddhist temples where many people have been searching for loved ones — so that forensic experts could get on with the job of trying to identify the victims.

Teams have been taking DNA samples from surviving family members of the missing in what is being described as the biggest and most difficult victim identification operation the world has seen.

But with thousands of people still listed as missing it may be that some of the victims are never identified.

Alan Jones, whose daughter, Charlotte, 23, was on the island of Racha Yai, south of Phuket, when the tsunami struck, was one of those who

accused the government yesterday of not doing enough to help.

He said his wife Elisabeth had been on the island looking for their daughter but had given up hope.

"She has been very angry this week that she has had no help from the British government at all," Mr Jones told the BBC. "We have had some help, but nothing from the British government and my wife is therefore very bitter."

He also criticised Mr Blair for continuing his holiday in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el Sheikh.

"What is he doing staying in Sharm?" he said. "What on earth was he doing hiding in Sharm? I couldn't believe that when I heard it. The man has lost the plot as far as I am concerned."

Speaking on the World at One, Mr Straw said he understood Mr Jones's feelings and that he had asked a senior Foreign Office official to contact the family.

But he said that Foreign Office staff had dealt with a "very large number" of relatives and that overall they had responded "absolutely magnificently".

Meanwhile staff numbers at the Metropolitan police's central casualty bureau in north London will increase from 500 to 800 today to cope with the increase in calls expected as people return to work.

The call centre, which is handling queries from people worried about friends and relatives caught up in the devastation, took more than 40,000 calls in the three days following the tsunami.

Victims and
survivors

Total death toll across the region
144,970

Total confirmed dead in
Indonesia
94,081

Total confirmed dead in
Sri Lanka
30,196
6,665 missing

Total confirmed dead in
Thailand
5,187
8,457 people — many tourists — missing

Total presumed dead in the Indian state of
Tamil Nadu and the **Andaman islands**
15,160

● President George Bush joined with his father and former president Bill Clinton to launch a public appeal across America for disaster donations

● US secretary of state Colin Powell and Florida governor Jeb Bush arrived in Thailand for a four-day trip in the disaster zones

● The UN is concentrating relief efforts in Indonesia's western Sumatra and Aceh province, where the death toll is likely to rise steeply to more than 100,000

● 1,500 US marines are set to land in Sri Lanka as Tamil Tiger rebels who control northern areas of the island claim emergency relief operations are working well

Reports and analysis,
pages 2-5, including:

● Swedes face agony of waiting to see who has survived, **page 4**

● With the aid helicopters in Aceh, **page 5**

● Martin Kettle and George Monbiot, **page 18**

● Leader comment, **page 19**

● David Aaronovitch, **G2, page 5**

Prescott plan to provide £60,000 homes

Peter Hetherington
Regional affairs editor

Young couples and single people priced out of the housing market could get subsidised loans underpinned by the government under plans to extend home ownership and increase social mobility.

The initiative in a new housing strategy from John Prescott, to be unveiled later this month, also involves using thousands of acres of government land, particularly in London and the south, to build houses with the aim of producing a home for £60,000.

Ministers have been appalled by the findings of a recent report for the charity Shelter showing a widening wealth

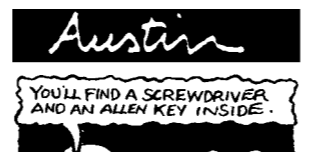
gap between home owners and people in rented accommodation. It warned that rising house prices were taking Britain back to the deep social divisions of Victorian society.

In an interview with the Guardian, Mr Prescott underlined the government's frustration at the cost of housing, in spite of prices dipping slightly on the open market, saying: "We've got interest rates low, inflation low, why the hell [is the price of building a house] going up when in other countries it only moves at the rate of inflation? It is unacceptable that prices have been going up at 10 times the rate of inflation, more than that."

The cut-price homes could be achieved by the government re-

taining the ownership of sites, to bring construction costs down, and inviting bids from developers. Ministers say some builders are already showing interest. The strategy will be partly aimed at people on lower incomes living in around 1m properties provided by government-funded housing associations, now the only builders of social homes for rent.

Rather than selling off association homes as Tories favour the deputy prime minister wants to give tenants a foot on the housing ladder by offering them a part-equity stake in a house, or a flat. The idea is that it would become a "portable asset" which could be transferred to another house on the open market after a few years, leav-



ing the housing association property in the public sector. But the boldest initiative involves what could become a

new housing fund offering low-cost mortgages, perhaps at zero interest, in an attempt to make wider home ownership and social mobility one of the key themes in the runup to a general election.

Talks have already been held between Mr Prescott's Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Council of Mortgage Lenders. Significantly, the Treasury is backing the idea.

Already surplus land owned by the NHS, mainly old hospital sites, is being transferred to the government's national regeneration agency, English Partnerships, as a first step in the Prescott initiative. Ministry of Defence land is also a target.

Leader comment, **page 19**

The U-bend of history

Owen Bowcott

The battle for soft toilet paper in the civil service lasted 17 years, according to official documents released under the Freedom of Information Act today.

The bizarre file — encompassing earnest medical decisions about the porosity of rival brands of tissues and the financial implications — was not closed until 1981.

Under the old government regulations, this controversy over conveniences would have remained a state secret for a further 30 years. The new law, however, means that the dossier can now be read at the National Archives in Kew, west London.

Sprinkled with comic asides which would not have disgraced a Carry On film, it reveals a cost-conscious bureaucracy belatedly coming to terms with the modern world.

The file was opened in February 1964 with an approach to the Treasury from a Dr John Hunt. "An unusual request! A patient of mine has piles and he thinks that the government lavatory paper is out of date and extremely bad for his complaint. He has asked me if there is any chance of it being changed to a softer type."

"One for the bottom of the file," a civil servant noted.

The issue was passed to Dr Cornelius Medvei, a doctor in Whitehall, who replied to Dr Hunt: "It has been calculated

that if the cost of the precious paper would go up even by half a farthing daily, it would involve HM government in an extra expense of £130,000 a year."

Those yearning for softer paper made little progress but the issue was revived again in 1967. "HMSO are reluctant to see a general changeover to soft tissue because they spend £300,000 yearly on toilet rolls," it was recorded.

A desperate plea was sent in two years later from the audio pool, presumably by a typist.

In the 80s, softer toilet paper dropped in price below hard paper ... which was consequently flushed down the U-bend of history.

National Archives, **page 8**

Manifesto
surprise

Tory leader Michael Howard has launched the first instalment of the Tory party manifesto — five months before the Tony Blair is expected to hold the general election

Page 7

Game old
birds

A report into the longevity of birds has come up with some surprising results — with one Manx shearwater returning to UK shores every year for the last 55 years

Page 9

Soldier's
rebellion

An Israeli soldier has become his country's first to be arrested for calling on his fellow troops to refuse to abandon an army outpost in a West Bank settlement

Page 13

Tripod
trouble

An bricklayer has gained cult status after hurling a camera tripod at the Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and leaving him with a bruise to the back of his head

Page 14

Top of the
stocks

After making gains of 33% with its stock selections last year, the Guardian's business section looks ahead to 2005's choices — and hopes for even better results

Page 15

Golden
gloves

Kevin McCarra on why 22-year-old goalkeeper Petr Cech may be the key to Chelsea getting their hands on the league title for the first time in 50 years

Page 24

On the trail
of the Grail

After a hunt involving secret societies, demands for papal apologies and rumours of a network of secret tunnels, the search for the cup of Christ ends up in Hertford

G2, page 6

Quick Index

Weather **17**

Cryptic Crossword **36**

Quick Crossword **G2, 23**

Today's TV **G2 back page**



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