

Asia Bus Response –

The industry response to an overwhelming disaster

The pictures of the Indian Ocean tsunami flashed around the world on Boxing Day 2004 and for weeks afterward. Like many others, I found myself watching the media footage in disbelief, the water, the debris, the indiscriminate loss of so many lives. The scale of the tragedy was almost too much to take in.

On the Internet, CNN and Australian TV showed material not seen on UK terrestrial stations. In one clip a pale blue minibus was being swept out to sea, and inside the vehicle small hands could be seen moving helplessly at the window.

I watched what was left of a dozen buses in a bus station. Some huge hand had attempted to pull them inside out and then thrown them on top of one another like so many toys. Listeners were told that 'at least 240 people' had died in the tangle of metal hit by the giant wave.

In the face of such gut-wrenching images our human instinct is to help. But what can we do? What do we have that would be of practical benefit when so much has been lost by so many?

Could we send buses?

Over the period of a few days I spoke with some of the UK bus industry's major players, who expressed similar incredulity and the wish to do something to help. In the worst affected areas, infrastructure was completely destroyed and hundreds of buses lost; couldn't we replace them with some from the UK?

Across the industry the response was the same; a couple of phone calls and half a dozen buses had been donated. But buses were only one part of the equation; we needed the assistance of an agency with overseas experience to facilitate the movement of buses into Asia, even though the immediate emergency would be over by the time the buses arrived.

That agency had to know and be trusted by the destination governments so that we could be sure our buses would reach the people who needed them most.

The missing agency

I'd worked on different projects with many overseas aid agencies, but they were overwhelmed by the tsunami emergency and couldn't consider a project that would take perhaps four months to realise.

Then the UK Manager of Islamic Relief appeared in a BBC Radio interview. When I called he was immediately interested and agreed almost right away to send an estimated 50 vehicles to the worst-hit areas of Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

So with the support of the industry and Islamic Relief as our charity partner, the Asia Bus Response initiative was launched to the press in the first week of January 2005 and anticipated to run for about four months.

Which buses and what for?

The UK's mid-life buses are now being removed from service to be replaced by low-floor, high-tech vehicles. These older, easy-to-run buses are suited to the climate and conditions of Asia, and thanks to excellent coverage of the Asia Bus Response

initiative in the trade press, were now donated by bus and coach operators across the UK, together with spare parts to lengthen the working lives of the vehicles.

Each bus cost around £4,000 to ship, so we needed time-expired buses, not junk. This was all the more important because the Asia Bus Response vehicles would be used entirely by children; in Banda Aceh as mobile classrooms, in Galle, to transport



Mitch de Faria.

tsunami-traumatised children to school for the first time since the disaster.

Delays and red tape

In March the project stalled. We hadn't anticipated such chaos in the destination countries and the delays that would cause. Ports were blocked and at a standstill, and although both countries were to receive buses without cost to themselves, Islamic Relief eventually waited almost six months to obtain import tax waivers.

As time went on we dropped the idea of filling the vehicles with supplies. What would have been useful at the beginning of the emergency was now of limited value, and the receiving governments began to restrict in-coming supplies.

In the delay we feared donor operators would lose interest and withdraw their buses, but to their credit they remained firm. Despite the wait the number of donated vehicles rose steadily, from 20 to 50 to more than 100. The industry had taken the project to its heart. None of us could quite believe it.

Friends and colleagues

My decade-long association with the UK bus industry through the Bus Industry Awards Scheme, an association now ended, left me with many friends in the business but without a great deal of industry knowledge. In the development of Asia Bus Response, those friends and colleagues came into their own.

Chris Moyes committed the first vehicles. Brian King pledged buses and was at the end of the phone whenever industry advice was required. Practical problems were dealt with by Phil Stockley at Solent Blue Line, spares and exportation issues by the wonderful Roger Heard OBE, and Ray Stenning and his team put together the Asia Bus Response website, www.asiabusresponse.co.uk.

As more vehicles were offered, the realities of sending donated buses overseas became increasingly complex. Shipping agents, insurers, transport lawyers, driver agencies and Government department staff became new friends, coming

together to provide a practical response to an overwhelming and undeniable need.

Asia Bus Response - second shipment

The first Asia Bus Response buses were eventually handed over to Islamic Relief at Marwell Zoological Park, Hampshire, on 8 June. All the parties involved were represented. After months of uncertainty, the day was sunny and very happy, and there was obvious relief that the vehicles were at last on their way. The cargo sailed ten days later and arrived in Asia in July, where the buses are now in daily use.

It was expected that Asia Bus Response would close down a few weeks later, but the industry, ever generous, offered yet more vehicles. The Sri Lanka Government, having lost some 350 buses and thousands of other vehicles to the tsunami, was desperate for more buses if Asia Bus Response could provide them.

A proud achievement

Asia Bus Response 2 is scheduled to depart in December. A list of 63 further vehicles has been sent to the Transport Ministry in Colombo for approval. We hope to attract still more vehicles before our second and final shipment is confirmed mid November.

The Asia Bus Response project will close after 12 months, at the end of the year.

In total this unique, all-industry project, the largest charitable partnership initiative by the UK bus and coach industry to date, will have donated



some 200 buses to the peoples of Sri Lanka and Indonesia; a proud achievement by a most caring industry.

"The arrival of buses from Asia Bus Response will be seen by ordinary Sri Lankan people as the most visible and concrete benefit from the international community. The kindness of the UK's bus industry will leave a positive imprint on the hearts and minds of all the Sri Lankan people for a very long time to come."

Hon Jeyaraj Fernandopulle MP
Minister of Trade, Commerce & Consumer Affairs, Chief Government Whip

Government of Sri Lanka

To donate buses and spare parts to ABR2, and to provide photos & video footage of donated buses in action in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, contact Mitch de Faria on Tel 01664 561711 or email info@asiabusresponse.co.uk

By Mitch de Faria