

Sri Lanka's Experience on the Role of Customs in Natural Disaster Relief



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Outline

- ▶ Background
- ▶ Sri Lanka's vulnerability to disasters
- ▶ Customs Role in disaster relief
- ▶ SL Customs Experience in disaster relief operations
- ▶ SL Customs preparedness to face future emergency situations
- ▶ Challenges

Background

- ▶ Sri Lanka as a small island in Indian Ocean, is generally vulnerable to different types of natural disasters
- ▶ Relief to the affected, largely depends on foreign assistance
- ▶ Sri Lanka Customs as a border agency, plays a important role in clearance of relief supplies to reach the affected people without a delay

Sri Lanka's vulnerability to disasters

- ▶ Sri Lanka is situated in the path of two monsoons, therefore it is mostly affected by weather related disasters.
- ▶ Most common hazards experienced in Sri Lanka.
 - ▶ Floods mostly due to monsoonal rain or effects of low pressure systems
 - ▶ Droughts due to failure of monsoonal rain
- ▶ Sri Lanka is also prone to hazards such as landslides, lightning strikes, coastal erosion, epidemics and effects of environmental pollution.

Sri Lanka's vulnerability to disasters



Landslide - Koslanda, 2014

Time: 7.0 Local time Date 29 Oct 2014

Cause :Due to Heavy Rain

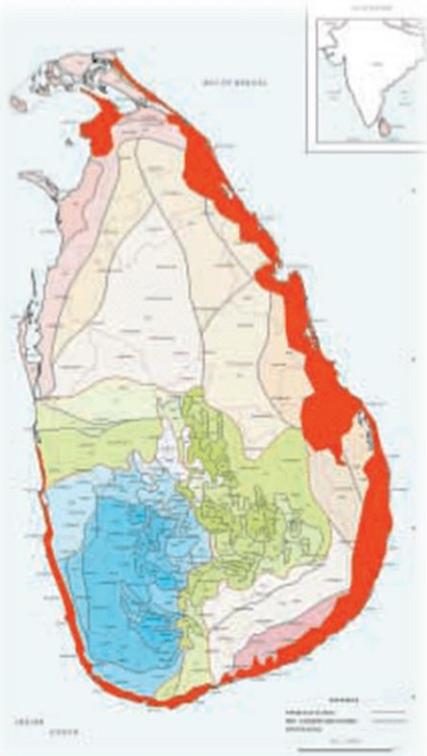
Deaths : 16, Missing: 192, Property

Damage: 150 houses destroyed,
infrastructure damage



Floods - Pollonaruwa, 2014

Sri Lanka's vulnerability to disasters



Tsunami 2004 - Sri Lanka

On 26th December 2004, almost two-thirds of the Sri Lankan coast was affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami highlighting the country's vulnerability to low-frequency but high impact events.

Customs Role in Disaster Relief

- ▶ In crisis situations, especially in natural disasters, bottle necks occur at airports and other entry points, which quickly become overwhelmed with the large volumes of incoming relief supplies and relief workers.
- ▶ The preparedness of Customs to efficiently handle such situations is of critical importance!
- ▶ Whilst speedy clearance of relief cargo is of utmost importance, customs as a law enforcement agency should not compromise appropriate *Standards of Customs Control* in doing so.
- ▶ Customs Facilitation in the area of Emergency Humanitarian Relief should take account of the principles of risk management

SL Customs experience in disaster relief operations

- ▶ During past decade, Sri Lanka faced several natural disasters of high magnitude, 2004 tsunami being the most damaging.
- ▶ 2004 tsunami devastated most of the coastal belt of the country with nearly 40,000 civilian deaths and enormous damage to property.
- ▶ Relief operations during 2004 tsunami was a unique experience for all relief agencies due to the prevailing ethnic conflict (civil war) in the country.

The country was under a war situation at the time tsunami disaster, 2004



Northern and Eastern coast was badly affected and LTTE activities were at the highest level in this area

Cont..

- ▶ There were many restrictions on items to be sent to North and East due to the conflict situation that prevailed
- ▶ Despite constraints, essential relief items were sent to the affected communities through a coordinated mechanism among relevant agencies
- ▶ In addition to the provisions existed in the customs to regulate the handling of relief cargo, the urgency that prevailed during tsunami prompted Sri Lanka Customs to formulate new regulations and mechanisms to cope up with the situation

Issues faced during the release process...

- ▶ Release of incoming relief items and relief workers without delay
- ▶ Restrictions on communication equipment
- ▶ Facilitate delegates with Diplomatic Privileges
- ▶ Speedy clearance of large volume of passengers and site visitors
- ▶ Imposition of taxes, duties and charges on humanitarian consignments
- ▶ Inadequate staff in SL Customs
- ▶ Absence of a Single Window to co-ordinate among authorities to expedite relief articles

Important measures taken by Sri Lanka Customs to expedite relief cargo clearance

- ▶ Establishment of a **Relief Facilitation Unit (RFU)**

To Facilitate clearance of goods received or imported to provide relief to the victims of the tsunami disaster a centralized agency was established by the Department, in January 2005.

- ▶ *A simplified goods declaration* for clearance of relief consignments was introduced

- ▶ RFU provided a round the clock service including public holidays

- ▶ Several circulars containing instructions as to how the relief cargo should be cleared were issued by the General Treasury in consultation with relevant agencies including Sri Lanka Customs

Examination of Relief Goods

- ▶ Generally, relief goods need not be examined.
- ▶ If circumstances demand goods may be examined, keeping in mind the proper balance between enforcement and facilitation.
- ▶ However, they should be subjected to a random cargo examination to satisfy minimum Customs requirements.
- ▶ Follow instructions DOPL 500

Some of the Difficulties Involved in the release process

- ▶ Relief items of irrelevant nature
- ▶ Poor coordination with Ministries, Departments and other stakeholders
- ▶ Inadequate number of Customs House Agents
- ▶ Difficulties in relief cargo examination due to limited space

SL Customs preparedness to face future emergency situations

- ▶ Close collaboration with Disaster Management Centre [DMC]
- ▶ Emphasize the importance of emergency relief operations during regular training programs for Customs Officials
- ▶ Conduct of workshops to evaluate the capabilities of Customs from a disaster relief perspective, particularly in the areas of handling passengers and relief cargo arriving during a disaster in proper manner. eg. Get Airports Ready for Disaster [GARD]
- ▶ Guidelines for Customs officials are being prepared in consultation with relevant agencies on emergency relief operations

GARD - Highlighted Issues and Solutions Relevant to Customs

► Issues

- Inadequate number of customs screening channels for arriving & departing passengers.
- The potential detention of different types of goods require
- Supervision/authorization of different agencies in different locations.

► Solutions

- Contact the Ministry of Finance/ Director General of Customs to source additional equipment or manpower if a manual check process is used
- Request AASL to provide space
- Request Director General of Customs to liaise and obtain authorization to setup “*one stop shop*”



Ministry of Disaster Management
Ministry of Civil Aviation
Government of Sri Lanka



Challenges

- ▶ Identifying focal points within the relevant organizations(NGOs / Donors) to coordinate with Government Agencies
- ▶ Incorporation of relevant International tools into Customs procedures
- ▶ Disseminating Customs Procedures to other national level organizations in order to enhance their awareness

THANK YOU!



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Q & A...

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