

The tsunami: A personal account from Mi

Jessica Patchett
Reporter

Mirai Booth-Ong stirred in her grandfather's bed. She must have been dreaming – earthquakes don't happen in Malaysia. Back in Tokyo there were earthquakes all the time, but not here. Mi rolled over and went back to sleep.

Downstairs, one of Mi's uncles and her grandmother were eating breakfast. "Stop shaking the table," Mi's uncle said. Her grandmother replied, "I'm not." He got up from the table and went to the bathroom, where he said he saw water sloshing out of the toilet.

At a nearby park in Penang, Mi's mom was doing aerobics with 600 people in an outdoor arena. With so many people moving up and down, no one realized the ground was moving back and forth underneath them.

Mi and her family had gathered in Penang in honor of the previous day: December 25 marked 100 days after her grandfather had died. In Chinese culture, it is traditional for families to reunite at that time. Only one of Mi's uncles couldn't come for the reunion.

Ong had to stay at the Galle Fort Hotel in Sri Lanka, where he and his partner host tourists. Growing in popularity, the hotel couldn't be left even to visit his family on Dec. 25. But when the ground shook Sri Lanka the next day, people left panic-stricken.

Mi hadn't been dreaming. Between 9 and 10 a.m. Dec. 26, a massive earthquake began under the Indian Ocean. Unaware of the great effects of the small tremors he felt earlier, Mi's uncle woke her up and said people were gathering outside.

Confused, Mi got up. In Tokyo, the last thing anyone did in an earthquake was run to the elevator. But, since her grandmother can't walk

well, Mi and her family took the elevator down 15 stories. Outside, Mi looked beyond the street and below the piles of rocks to the ocean lapping against the beach. She was surprised at how much people worried.

"I grew up taking earthquakes for granted. So, I didn't really think about what was to follow," Mi said. "I didn't know earthquakes could happen underwater. I didn't know tsunami's could follow an earthquake."

But a tsunami did follow the earthquake that morning. By the time Mi was outside, waves stories high were hitting nations' shores across the Indian Ocean.

"If we knew what was to follow [the earthquake], we would have known that going outside would have been the worst thing to do," Mi said. When the waves came to the side of Penang where Mi was staying, the water did little more than deposit mud and sand on the road nearby. But on the other side of the island, 70 people died, Mi said.

In the afternoon, Mi's aunt told her family she heard reports of the tsunami, and that it had hit the Galle Fort much worse than Penang.

The family got in touch with Ong at the Galle Fort Hotel and learned that his staff had left in search of loved ones when the waves hit, and that the hotel was being used as a refuge for people left homeless. Ong said he was worried about the safety of the hotel and the people staying there. He didn't know if there was enough food and water for the refugees.

Days later, Ong had not left the hotel. "When he finally went outside, there were overturned buses and dead bodies laying all around,"



Mirai Booth-Ong

tragedy have taken residence there. The staff is coming back, but people talk about when a second tsunami will come.

"People aren't going to want to go back for a while," Mi said, referring to the tourists who keep Southeast Asia's economy alive. In places like Penang, tourist areas were badly damaged, but local housing was generally spared. In other places, entire towns were swept away.

About 500 people were killed in Galle; 30,600 on the small island of Sri Lanka. About 70 people were killed in Malaysia where Mi was staying; 100,000 died in nearby Indonesia.

"Peoples' whole families washed away," Mi said, "I can't imagine what it's like to have your entire family just gone. I have uncles, aunts, cousins, my grandmother. My family was in two places that were hit and I think we're just really lucky."

Mi's family is deeply connected with people affected by this tragedy-but so is everyone else, Mi said. She is helping organize efforts at Elon in response to the tsunami disaster for what she said is a great need- shelter.

Habitat for Humanity and Heifer International both focus on helping third-world nations develop long-term sustainability resources. Money collected at Elon will be given to these groups to help rebuild South East Asia.

"I just don't know when to stop [asking for help]," Mi said. "The disaster is already off people's minds." But there will be people dealing with this tragedy their entire lives.


For the longer version of the story log on to <http://www.elon.edu/pendulum>

Contact Jessica Patchett at pendulum@elon.edu or 278-7247.



Photo Submitted
Millions of people were caught off-guard when a tsunami followed the greatest earthquake SouthEast Asia has seen this century. Five million people are still in need of medical supplies to recover from the disaster.

SAF
Student Action with Farmworkers
Paid Summer Internships
and Full-Year Apprenticeship
Available
Contact SAF at itfcampo@duke.edu or 919.660.3652
Application Deadline: February 15, 2005

**Family
Medical Care
New Patients
Welcome**

**ROBERT J. MEAD MD
PATRICIA PIERCE ANP**

3128 COMMERCE PLACE
BURLINGTON, NC 27215
M-F 8-12 & 1-5



Photo Submitted

In total, more than 15,000 people died on the tsunami. And in the aftermath of disease, injury and loss, hundreds of thousands more are struggling to live