

RELIGION

ORTHODOX JEWISH GROUP IDS BODIES; DISASTER: FORENSIC WORKERS HELP IN TSUNAMI AFTERMATH.

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They're known as ``the team that sleeps with the dead'' -- a group of ultra-Orthodox Jewish forensic workers who have matched body parts to identities after countless scenes of carnage in Israel.

Now in Thailand, they have only one way to describe the aftermath of the tsunami: a disaster, literally, of biblical proportions.

``Only during the great flood in Genesis have there been sights like this, so many corpses, so many," said Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, a team leader. ``We are experiencing ... something from the days of Genesis."

Members of Meshi-Zahav's ultra-Orthodox Jewish rescue services group Zaka came with Israeli dental, fingerprint and DNA experts to resort areas in southern Thailand to help find and identify missing Israelis. But they have ended up working on as many victims as they can, of all nationalities.

``Everything we know in Israel, all the terrorist bombings don't begin to compare to what is happening here," Meshi-Zahav said.

Here, the Zaka men have exchanged the black suits and hats they customarily wear for white coveralls and face masks, their ultra-Orthodox religious faith apparent only by their long side curls. Some of the Israeli forensic experts accompanying Zaka are secular Jews.

Other forensic teams have dubbed the group ``the team that sleeps with the dead'' because they toil nearly 24 hours a day at Buddhist pagodas transformed into morgues to identify those who died in last week's tsunami, which ravaged swaths of Thailand's resort coast.

``When we are getting ready to leave at 3 a.m., we're the only ones that are still with the dead," Meshi-Zahav said.

In Israel, Zaka collects body parts at bombing scenes to ensure complete burial, in accordance with Jewish law.

That experience -- they see on average 38 bodies a week at home -- has helped them identify corpses faster than many of the other 20 or so forensic teams that have come to Thailand, making them much in demand by grieving families.

By Thursday, the team had identified 21 people -- four Israelis and 17 foreigners and Thais. Three other Israelis are missing; Thailand has about 5,300 confirmed dead, with 3,700 others listed as missing.

The bodies -- exposed to sea water and Thailand's searing heat -- are quickly decomposing. Workers spray the pagoda grounds with disinfectant and place dry ice around the bodies to combat the stench.

Examining one victim for a possible identification, a dentist reviewed records that matched a specific tooth to a person's name, but the team couldn't find it on the body.

``Someone else would have said, 'no tooth, no identification.' Then, with a little experience, you know the tooth could have fallen into the body bag, and with a thorough search ... you find it," Meshi-Zahav said, speaking in Hebrew through a translator.

The team also knows about the agony of uncertainty.

``It's about the torments of the soul that the families and their friends have so long as their loved one hasn't been brought to burial," he said.

That knowledge pushes them in their search, which Meshi-Zahav describes as a ``calling." In one case, they examined 300 bodies to find a victim who was missing a toenail, but were unsuccessful.

``In all this pain of the families, you see a family that has gotten a confirmed identification and been able to bring back their loved one. You see the relief. There's no greater feeling than that," he said.

As they work, the team keeps to strict Jewish dietary laws. Because they eat only Kosher foods approved by a rabbi, or fresh fruits and vegetables, their diet has consisted of only coconuts and lychees, except when a Jewish group brought them bread and tuna.

They also marked the Jewish Sabbath with a traditional meal at sundown on Friday.

``The tablecloth was a body bag. Around the table, were victims' families and members of the Israeli team, and the subject of conversation was corpses," Meshi-Zahav said.

They sang a few Sabbath songs, ``and then we had to finish up and go back to work," -- which, he said, is allowed because Sabbath laws are suspended for their work.

Besides the forensic team in Thailand, the Israeli government has also sent 82 tons of aid, including medicine, water, food, blankets and generators, to Sri Lanka, along with about 50 civilian medical and rescue personnel. In addition, Israel's non-governmental rescue services have sent 80 tons of food and water, as well as \$100,000 in blood products.

Meshi-Zahav said the Zaka team is not going home anytime soon.

``Everything we can do to help in the field while there are still bodies, we'll be here," he said.