

## 10 TIPS TO COVER NATURAL DISASTERS

By Michael Casey

1. **Be Prepared.** Often disaster zones lack electricity, Wi-Fi and any other basic services like clean water. Have a first aid kit packed and ready to go. Bring along energy bars, water and anything like dried noodles that can be easily prepared. Also bring along batteries, a SAT phone if possible, and a device to get Wi-Fi or connect to a hot spot. If the disaster occurs in a dangerous area like parts of Afghanistan or Pakistan, protect yourself. Bring along flak jackets and gas masks. Bring cash as ATM machines and banks may not be open.

2. **In the moments after you land, do a quick survey of the area and, if possible, map out routes in and out of the disaster zone.** Get a local driver/guide and vehicle if possible for easy entry and exit. Search out eyewitness and survivors to the event. Get plenty of color and as much detail as you can find. That will get you good copy in the early days but could open the door to broader, more in-depth stories as you go along.

3. **Find the winners and losers, the heroes and zeroes.** In every disaster, there are groups and individuals who come out ahead and those who get left behind. Find those people. There are also heroes who saved their villages or family, and those who should have sent out the disaster alerts but failed. All of these leads could lead to great stories. Find the little guys who are reaching remote areas or actually listening to the community and providing effective relief.

4. **Find the officials in charge.** Internationally, that is often the UN. The agency typically serves as the epicenter for the response with other NGOs setting up nearby. Often survivors

and their families stream in to these centers seeking help. Track down the lead official and use them to get you a list of contacts and meeting schedules where groups come together to coordinate, gossip and complain. Great place for stories. Also look to them and the government for statistics that can help illustrate who has been affected and where. It also puts your disaster in context.

**5. Don't follow the herd.** Like so many big events, there is a tendency to follow the pack, which in a disaster can be limiting. That often means heading to the nearest refugee camp from the airport or interviewing many of the same survivors as the other reporters. The early breaks in the first week of the 2004 tsunami came from reporters willing to hire a boat or helicopter to search for survivors in remote areas who had been ignored by the major aid groups.

**6. Don't believe the hype.** Often rumors spread that are too good to be true, especially in the age of social media. These rumors are usually unfounded, so double and triple check everything. I remember during the 2004 tsunami there were rumors that children were being taken by American Christian groups. The UN looked into the reports and found them groundless.

**7. In any disaster, the news moves fast and the challenge for any reporter is keeping up.** The best way I found to do this is to understand that most disasters have similar cycles \_ the search and rescue phase, the emergency assistance and rebuilding. Keep ahead of the cycle and you probably will be one step ahead of the competition.

**8. Bite the hands that feed you.** You often will get your best stories from the UN, the national government and other

international NGOs. But be willing to go beyond the photo ops and soft features. Dig a little deeper and examine how much is being raised, where the money was spent. We found NGOs building shoddy housing, offering job training that didn't lead to jobs and a relief mission that, in the first few months, was chaotic and rudderless.

**9. Remember the forgotten.** Disasters often are one-size fits all scenarios. Aid groups come in and treat everyone equally. This makes sense initially. But often what gets lost are the needs of the most disadvantaged \_ women, the elderly and disabled. Find these groups and you may find the stories that rarely get told.

**10. A disaster lasts more than few weeks.** Too often, news organizations flood the zone in the first few days and weeks after a disaster. Then, they leave in mass. A good reporter will return to the scene three months, six months on. One of the best stories I did was returning to the tsunami site months after the earthquake to report on the missteps of the reconstruction.