The day the ocean blocked daylight

A MALAYSIAN survivor of the 2004 tsunami, well-known radio announcer Priscilla Patrick, shared her harrowing experience with a movement called Helping Angel's Speaker Congress (HASCO) in a video presentation two years ago.

Priscilla was holidaying in Sri Lanka when she saw the ocean rise to an astounding height that blocked daylight. "It raced towards me sounding like a (Boeing) 747," she said, adding there was no time to do or say anything because "the brain was still trying to comprehend what the eyes were telling it." She froze up and felt dumbfounded.

In one minute, nails from the wooden floors of the chalet began popping out while the bed and the cupboard crumbled to pieces.

Forty seconds after battling the spins and feeling her clothes being ripped off of her body, all the while holding her breath, she said reality and denial hit her intermittently.

Fear took over completely, and she finally understood the full meaning of what a "catch-22" situation was because "if you breathe you will die but if you don't breathe, you will also die".

She said she was enveloped and sealed in fear, and acceptance became a battle. "Your eyes close automatically and everything beautiful and important to you flashes by. Then, without a choice, you surrender and breathe water," she recalled vividly.

For nearly half a million people around the globe, their lives ended that day but not for Priscilla. "I witnessed miracles and humanity of an unheard or unseen level," said the avid traveller.

She said as she wandered around "in shock, pain and with open wounds", a foreigner offered her some clothes.

She saw other locals and foreigners who were not affected offering her their phones, food, clothes, medical supplies and expertise. "About four hours later, a local man approached me with my backpack in his left hand and asked if it was mine."

Priscilla said it was hers and asked him: "How did you know and where did you find it?"

He said: "In my living room, madam. And Buddha told me it was yours." The man clutched a Buddha figurine in his right palm.

Priscilla later learned that his home was 4km inland from where her chalet used to be.

It was nothing short of a miracle when she found her backpack still contained her drenched wallet, plane ticket and passport — everything she needed to get home.

Later that evening, Priscilla with five other survivors of various nationalities, were offered shelter for the night by a foreigner married to a local. The next morning, she said the ocean looked serene, like nothing had happened. That was until the cries, wailing and stench hit her.

Out of nowhere, four foreign journalists offered them a ride to Colombo. What was normally a four-hour journey stretched to 11 hours as they had to go through the forest area.

"During the first hour of the journey, we saw truckloads of coffins passing by and white flags to signify the death and stench that followed us for miles up ahead."

Almost a year later, she decided to give back personally and on Boxing Day in 2005, about 50 families along the coast where she stayed received gas cookers and kettles donated by her and her friends.

Another survivor, Indonesian Rizal Shahputra, had drifted off to sea for nine days after the tragedy before being rescued by a passing ship some 160km west of his home town of Banda Aceh.

Fortunately for him, the crew of the MV Durban Bridge spotted Shahputra frantically waving them down as he clung to branches and debris.

The ship took Shahputra to Port Klang, where he was taken to hospital for treatment. Miraculously, he only sustained cuts to his legs, despite the scarring ordeal.

Shahputra, who had been cleaning a mosque in his hometown with his father and other villagers when the tsunami struck, lost his entire family in the tragedy, except for one older brother.

In interviews with local and foreign media, he recalled how he and several others clung to a tree trunk but, one by one, they fell over the days and drifted out to sea.

He was reported to have survived on rainwater and floating coconuts.

On learning about his fate, UCSI University in Malaysia officially adopted Rizal Shahputra as a student on humanitarian grounds, sponsoring his living expenses and accommodation costs. He pursued an English Language course and completed an English Language and Communications Degree at the university.

He had told the media several years ago that he intends to eventually open a school and teach English in Banda Aceh.

By Laili Ismail and Suzanna Pillay