

Swedish Press

NYA SVENSKA PRESSEN

EST. 1929



An independent commission on Sweden's response to the aftermath of the tsunami has laid the blame for the government's inadequate response squarely on Prime Minister Göran Persson.

According to the commission, Göran Persson "has the all-embracing responsibility for the government offices' shortcomings in their handling of the consequences of the tsunami." The Prime Minister was told about the tsunami early on 26 December but was not updated regularly by aides.

Göran Persson, who had managed to deflect most criticism onto Foreign Minister Laila Freivalds in the immediate aftermath of the catastrophe, responded to the commission's findings by issuing an apology.

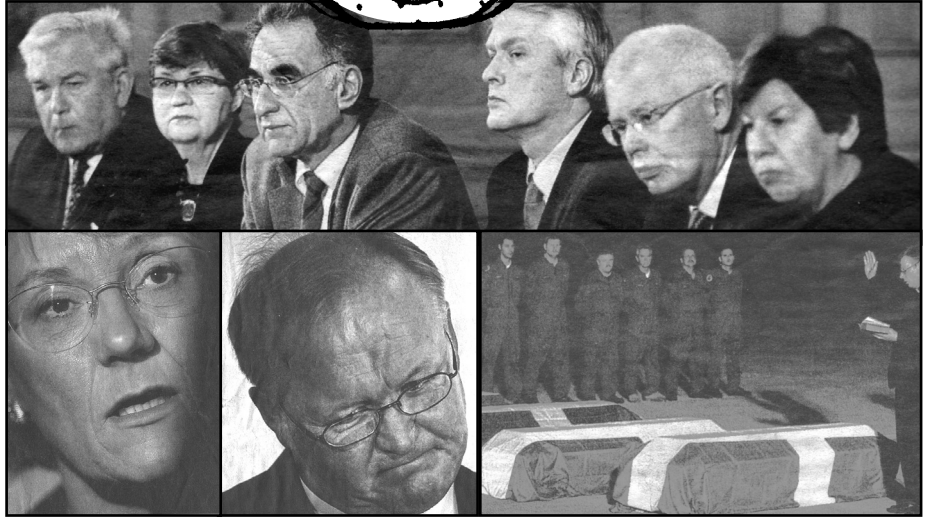
"I can only regret the mistakes that were made," he said.

The commission is critical of the foreign ministry for not having any mechanism for dealing with a major crisis. Laila Freivalds herself is criticized for failing to spread information about the catastrophe effectively among foreign ministry staff.

According to the commission's report, important information that had been received by the foreign ministry was lost in the hours after the catastrophe. Information that reached the ministry's switchboard did not reach the appropriate people in the government and incomplete information was therefore passed on to relatives.

It was unclear who was ultimately responsible for failures at the Foreign Ministry. The commission argues that Hans Dahlgren, cabinet secretary, ought to have taken a more active leadership role.

Responsibility for delays in arranging medical help for those hit by the disaster is shared between Mikael Sjöberg, state secretary at the health ministry, and health minister Ylva Johansson. They ought to have pressed more actively for action. The consequences of them failing to do so increased physical and psychological suffering for victims and their relatives, the commission reported. Medical officials failed to respond quickly as the true scale of the disaster emerged. Many officials did not interrupt



PRIME MINISTER SLAMMED BY TSUNAMI COMMISSION

their Christmas holidays to deal with the crisis.

The National Board of Health and Welfare waited three days before it took the initiative to provide medical help, as it was waiting for instructions from the foreign ministry, even though the foreign ministry did not have competence to provide such instructions.

The commission is recommending that a crisis response centre be set up with full power to act in such situations. The report was commissioned after the government's response to the tsunami was heavily criticized by ordinary Swedes and the media.

The disaster killed more than 500 Swedes - the highest casualty toll among European nations. For a long time now the number of casualties has remained steady at 544. 393 Swedes have been identified as dead and 151 are still officially missing. There could still be a number of bodies waiting to be identified in Thailand while the majority of the missing are not expected to be found. The identification process is not expected to be completed before the summer of 2006.

The tsunami catastrophe and the sinking of the Estonia ferry ten years earlier are the biggest disasters to hit Sweden in recent history. The number of casualties in the two catastrophes, that took place ten years apart, are almost equal. When the Estonia left the harbour of Tallinn on September 27, 1994

The Tsunami Commission (top) blasts Foreign Minister Laila Freivalds (above left) and Prime Minister Göran Persson (in the middle) for the inadequate response, but assigns most of the blame on the Prime Minister. (Above) Returning coffins.

there were 552 Swedes on board. Only 51 of them were saved.

In Swedish history the catastrophe that has taken most lives is the Spanish flu that in 1918 killed 38 000 people in Sweden. In earlier history, the Caroline homebound march over the mountains after Karl XII's death in Norway in 1718 was a major disaster. Of the Swedish force of 70 000 men, 23 000 succumbed to the cold weather, lack of food and equipment and to subsequent medical problems.

In the purely military area, it was the confrontation between Czar Peter and Karl XII in Poltava in 1709 that took the most Swedish lives. Between 7 000 and 10 000 men in the Caroline army never returned home. Another serious Swedish military catastrophe was King Karl IX's confrontation with the Poles in Kirkholm, outside Riga in 1605. Almost 8 000 Swedish soldiers were killed by a numerically inferior force. In 1676 when Karl XI saved Skåne for Sweden, 3 000 soldiers died in the bloody battle in Lund. And what is described as the great Swedish victory in Lützen in 1632 also caused a loss of 4 500 Swedish lives.