Nargis and Haiyan – just two names many might not recall. Yet the first one was a cyclone that hit Sri Lanka, killing 138,000. The second one was a typhoon hitting the Philippines in 2013. That death toll reached 6,340, with a 1,601 people still missing.

When a major natural disaster strikes it immediately makes its way to the front pages of the newspapers, reporters are being dispatched on the ground and broadcasters go on air with special editions. Yet, when the public interest starts waning, so do the headlines. However, the real suffering of the survivors is often just about to begin when the spotlight of the global press is being switched off. One of the missions of the Thomson Reuters Foundation is to pull out of the oblivion the disasters of the past decade and give their victims a face.

Belinda Goldsmith has been a foreign correspondent for more than 30 years, of which 20 with the news agency Reuters. Since last year she heads the Thomson Reuters Foundation as Editor-in-Chief. “A major focus of the Foundation is the long-term crisis reporting,” says Belinda Goldsmith. “When an earthquake occurs like in Afghanistan last week, the focus of the press is on the quake itself, then comes the measurement of the magnitude, then the press will cover the destruction and after that the arrival of the aid agencies.”

It is this short-term reporting that makes the headlines for a few days. But soon they will be replaced by other news.

“We at the Foundation look at the longer term”, explains Ms. Goldsmith. “We take a close look at what happened to the public services, the housing, jobs, education or water supply in the affected areas a few years down the line. And we also look at gender issues, as in many countries women are often more affected by the consequences of a natural disaster than men.”

The earthquake in Haiti in 2010 took the lives of a 225,000 people. It was the largest natural disaster in the past decade in terms of losses of human lives. And we wanted to check how things have evolved five years after the quake, how the money has been spent and if it has reached its aims.

Hence the Thomson Reuters Foundation dispatched reporters to Haiti, who had already been on the ground in 2010. “We track some people we talked to five years ago to see if and how their situation has changed”, says Ms Goldsmith. “There is a woman who has lost a child, a man who lost his job or a family that lost its home – if you have a human face, you can better relate to what happened.”

While short-term reporting is about getting the headline, long-term reporting is about “getting back the headline”, says Ms Goldsmith.

The money plays a key part in disaster relief, “We are talking about billions of dollars”, she says. “It is taxpayers money and money coming from private donations.” If it turns out it has not been spent well, then the question arises “how to spend it better next time”.

But there is also the problem, that a lot of the money committed by the governments did not even go to Haiti. Often it is other situations that surge and divert the attention. “The intentions are generally good, but sometimes mistakes are made”, explains Ms Goldsmith. “For example aid workers, who did not speak French, were sent to Haiti – a francophone country.”

Belinda Goldsmith also pleads for a more transparency for NGOs. “On the whole they do an excellent work. Nevertheless they need a better oversight.”

“A particularly difficult issue are last year with the ebola crisis. Journalists and especially aid workers are emotionally strongly affected. There is a general recognition, that there is a need for counselling. Journalists and especially aid workers are emotionally strongly affected. There is a general recognition, that the emotional trauma of the survivors is often just about to begin when the spotlight of the global press is being switched off.”

One message is very clear: “No story is worth your life!”

Belinda Goldsmith
Editor-in-chief, Thomson Reuters Foundation