

## Robin Needham

Robin Needham, who was killed by the tsunami earthquake in Thailand on 26 December aged 51, was a charity leader who had been involved in relief efforts for the poorest parts of Asia and Africa for more than three decades.

He was the head of CARE Nepal, a branch of the charity CARE International, that was founded to help survivors of the Second World War, and is now active in more than 70 countries. Based in Kathmandu, Needham led projects throughout rural Nepal including areas controlled by armed Maoist rebels in community forestry, primary healthcare, HIV/AIDS awareness, family planning, education and safe drinking water.

He was particularly committed to the protection of children from conflict, and was chairman of the association of international NGOs (non-government organisations) in Nepal, co-ordinating the work of more than 50 relief agencies. A tolerant and intensely practical humanitarian a master of project logistics in often near-impossible conditions Robin Needham was a revered figure in Nepal, to which he had made a long-term personal commitment, and an influential voice in the wider world of international relief work.

Christened Robin Arthur John Needham, Robin was born in London on 28 Aug 1953, and was brought up in Hampshire and North Yorkshire. He was a grandson of the 5th Earl of Kilmorey, the present earl being his cousin, the former Conservative minister Richard Needham. He was also a descendant of the second earl, 'Black Jack' Needham who was said to have modelled for the controversial naked statue of Achilles subscribed for by 'The women of England' and erected in Hyde Park as a tribute to Wellington in 1822, and who was interred in 1880 in his own Egyptian-style mausoleum at Twickenham, which he had built as a shrine to his teenage mistress.

Robin's mother's family, the Ramsdens, were brewers in Halifax. He was educated at Eton, and went on to study Chinese at Leeds University and as one of only a handful of foreign students in the mid-1970s in Beijing; he later did postgraduate work in social planning at Swansea.

During his 'gap year' in 1971, Needham travelled overland by bus to work for Concern, an Irish charity, at the Salt Lake refugee's camp on the outskirts of Calcutta, where 234,000 Pakistanis driven from their homes by hostilities between India and Pakistan were housed in desperate conditions. During his stay he also worked for Mother Theresa's mission and drove supply lorries to war-torn Dacca and became set on a career in relief work.

After graduating, Needham worked for a time at Kentwell Hall, a Suffolk stately home where he turned his creative talents to staging Tudor

re-enactments. Meanwhile, he was helping to establish Concern UK as its first vice chairman, and in 1979 he answered a call from the charity for volunteers to work with refugees on the Thai-Cambodian border where his command of Chinese came in useful haggling with rapacious traders in charcoal, the main source of cooking fuel. He went on to work for UNICEF in Thailand, and in 1980 he joined CARE.

He was posted to Somalia as a port officer at Mogadishu, and in 1984 to Kenya as a drought relief officer only to find the rains breaking on the day he arrived. He returned to London as the first national director of CARE UK, and became heavily involved in efforts to draw public attention to poverty and famine in Africa, including accompanying Bob Geldof to Mozambique. In 1988 Needham returned to Bangladesh as CARE's deputy director and head of planning, and in 1991 he moved to Ethiopia, becoming country director two years later. He was appointed head of CARE Nepal in 1998.

Robin Needham was a charismatic advocate for his calling, with a warm sense of humour, which included, when there were children to be entertained, a talent for magic tricks. Entirely classless, he was an unlikely but enthusiastic Old Etonian a connection which put him in good standing with the late King Birendra of Nepal, also an OE, and had recently taken him to an exotic OE gathering in Sri Lanka.

He married Lucy Bucknell, an American who also worked for UNICEF, in 1981; they had two sons, and adopted twin Bangladeshi daughters. Robin's favourite retreat was a barn he and his brother had converted in the late 1970s on a cousin's estate at Strathconon in the north of Scotland; latterly, he and Lucy acquired a beautiful house at Golden Buddha beach on Ko Phra Thong, a small island north of Phuket. Acutely conscious of earthquake risks from his years in Kathmandu, Needham sensed the tremor on Boxing Day some time before the waves came; he was last seen urging others away from the beach, and his body was found three days later. All his family survived.