More helping out as ‘voluntourists’

They’re a help, but by how much, some ask

BY JUDITH TAN

SALES director Ling Yen Wu is one person who can be counted on to take his own leave to pitch in at disaster sites.

He is now in earthquake-hit Japan as a logistics specialist with humanitarian group Mercy Relief.

It is his third relief mission after previous ones in China in 2008 and Indonesia in 2009, also in the wake of earthquakes.

Mr Ling, 31, is among a growing number of Singaporeans paying their own way to lend a hand – for five to 10 days – in mostly Third World countries in a trend called “voluntourism”.

They may also teach English, build homes and schools or help protect the environment, and then extend their stay for a couple more days to take in the sights.

While there are no figures on the number of people involved in voluntourism here, a check with seven non-governmental organisations (NGOs) showed all have had more inquiries.

But experts interviewed for a recent report in an American daily have questioned if unskilled volunteers can really make a difference in just a few days.

Agreeing, Associate Professor Low Aik Meng, dean of students at the Singapore Management University (SMU), said it “dilutes the essence of community service”. SMU students have to serve 80 hours of community service as a condition for graduating.

Then, there is also the question of whether the volunteers are really in it for noble reasons.

As a spokesman for the Singapore Red Cross (SRC) noted: “One reason for voluntourism or disaster tourism is to enhance one’s own resume. The volunteer can proudly say: ‘I was there to see the devastation and help the people.’”

The SRC, which has undertaken limited overseas field missions in past years, said these were open mostly to full-time staff.

Dr Caroline Brassard, an assistant professor with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, said short-term volunteers can still make a difference – but with proper planning.

Noting that many people cannot spare time to volunteer for a year or two, helping out for short periods also allows professionals like doctors to be involved and NGOs to tap these extra hands, she said.

It is the responsibility of the person “to ask himself and the NGO how he can best help before embarking on the project”.

Indeed, Mr Yong Teck Meng, national director of Habitat For Humanity (Singapore), said that if his volunteers returned thinking “more about having toured a country, but tourism should not be the motivating factor for volunteering, the volunteer should not be in it for noble reasons. “Our work is hard work so we really don’t have problems with people acting like tourists,” he added.

A spokesman for the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) said it encourages all potential volunteers to be aware of their responsibilities before committing.

“It is all right to include leisure activities within pockets of spare time, which help in learning about a country, but tourism should not be the motivating factor for volunteering, the SRC spokesman added.

Since July last year, some 40 Singaporeans have paid their way to be involved in SIF projects such as Water For Life and Words On Wheels.

Water For Life installs water filters for rural families in Cambodia while the other is a mobile library project in Vietnam.

At the end of the day, other groups like non-profit organisation CityCare acknowledge that voluntourism has helped expand the pool of people coming forward to give their time.

“It is a good way to create opportunities for people to volunteer and achieve a twofold objective. We have an average of 100 volunteers in different overseas projects annually,” said a spokesman for CityCare, the first Singapore NGO to send doctors to earthquake-hit Haiti last year.