

PRESS RELEASE

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Indian Ocean countries unprepared for ten metre “walls of water” that wiped out coastal communities following Asia quake

Early on the morning of 26 December an earthquake measuring 8.9 on the Richter Scale struck South Asia off the north west coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra. The quake was the largest in magnitude since 1964, triggering tidal waves that caused thousands of fatalities and immense destruction in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Even Somalia experienced waves that stretched across the Indian Ocean, drowning at least three people. The death toll is expected to reach over 15,000 across the region.

Exactly one year after an earthquake destroyed the historic city of Bam, Iran and killing over 26,000 people, yesterday's quake and subsequent tsunamis reminds us that communities around the world remain at high risk of human, economic and social losses in the face of a disaster.

Early warnings have existed since 1948 for countries in the Pacific basin; however, there is no existing tsunami alert system for the Indian Ocean. Coastal villages in the Pacific are aware of what measures to take if the sea recedes shortly after an earthquake, and many beaches have signs alerting people to the tsunami risks. In contrast, countries lying along the Indian Ocean were caught unaware by the enormous sea surges and rapidly rising sea levels.

“A key lesson to be learned from this disaster is the importance of early warning systems in reducing people's risk and vulnerability,” said Sálvano Briceño, Director of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) secretariat in Geneva. “A simple and timely message can go a long way and can mean the difference between life and death, not to mention between economic survival or ruin.”

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga declared that the disaster was the worst the country had ever confronted, acknowledging that Sri Lanka showed that it was “not very well organized” in the face of a major earthquake. This, she said, was a consequence of the country having little experience with natural hazards beyond floods. The result: over 5,800 dead in Sri Lanka alone.

“The damage is just phenomenal,” said United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland. “This may be the worst natural disaster in recent history, because it is affecting so many highly populated coastal areas.”

The upcoming World Conference on Disaster Reduction, to be held in Kobe, Hyogo (Japan) on 18-22 January 2005 is expected to prompt a quantum leap in learning and commitment to improving prevention, risk assessment and early warning systems. National and regional exchange of experiences will contribute to reducing risk and vulnerability across and beyond regions **before** the next disaster strikes.

For more information, please contact:

Nicole Rencoret, Awareness and Promotion
Inter-Agency Secretariat of the International Strategy
for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR)
Tel: +41 22 917 27 77
Email: rencoret@un.org