

PRESS RELEASE

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UN joins forces to implement early warning systems in tsunami-ravaged countries

Tsunami early warning systems could have saved thousands of lives in the devastating tsunami that struck Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India and neighbouring countries and islands on 26 December, according to UN sources.

Latest reports put the death toll at 55,000 people and still rising. Few of these people had more than a minute or two of warning, and by then it was too late to escape the fast-moving flood of seawater.

It could have been completely different. In the Pacific Ocean region, tsunami early warning systems have been in place for years, particularly in Japan and the United States, to protect citizens and towns along vulnerable coastlines that have experienced great destruction caused by tsunamis in the past. Now people are prepared and vulnerable areas are evacuated when threatened by tsunamis, with few deaths resulting in either country.

But in the Indian Ocean, the biggest tsunami in Asia's recent history spread out silently and effortlessly, racing across the placid open waters as fast as a jet plane while millions of people went about the day's tasks in and near the warm tropical waters, totally unaware of the catastrophe closing in upon them.

The United Nations plans to change this, and to help the battered countries of Asia to get access to the well-oiled early warning systems of the Pacific region.

"There is no reason why this cannot be done," said Salvano Briceño, Director of the secretariat on the UN's International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. "We have been in contact with UN agencies, technical institutions and governments in the region affected, and find that there is a strong basis of knowledge, technology and collaboration and a real readiness to act."

"I want to see that every coastal country around South Asia and Southeast Asia has at least a basic but effective tsunami warning system in place by this time next year."

The World Conference on Disaster Reduction to be held in Kobe, Hyogo, Japan on 18-22 January will provide a timely opportunity to learn from Pacific countries' experiences and transfer knowledge of tsunami early warning systems to those surrounding the Indian Ocean. A special session will be held to work out how such a system could be developed for the region.

Reid Basher, Coordinator of the ISDR's Platform for the Promotion of Early Warning, based in Bonn, Germany, says that early warning and preparedness systems are one of the most effective ways to protect people from disasters.

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"This is not just a matter of setting up a few instruments and computers," said Mr. Basher. "Many early warning systems fail at times of crisis because the warnings do not get to the people at risk, or are not understood, or are not acted upon. Effective early warning systems are people-centred. They require active engagement with community leaders and the public, in addition to sound technical systems."

"A tsunami warning system needs good public education and experienced emergency management to ensure that warnings are well communicated, well understood, and rapidly acted upon" he said.

While there is little anyone can do to prevent the destructive damage of tsunami, it is always possible for people to be evacuated out of harms way - provided timely warnings are available. The World Conference on Disaster Reduction next month represents a turning point to address the implementation of tsunami early warning systems in the Indian Ocean and thereby help avoid the failures of 26 December 2004.

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