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Paris meeting commits to development of Indian Ocean tsunami early warning system

Experts from the United Nations and the Indian Ocean countries affected by the December tsunami gathered at UNESCO's headquarters in Paris on 3-8 March 2005 to decide the ground rules for establishing a tsunami warning system in the Indian Ocean. The Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) organised the five-day meeting with support from the secretariat of the ISDR and other UN organisations.

The meeting agreed on a communiqué that sets out a package of principles that will allow immediate action on the development of a system by the end of next year. It was agreed that the system should be based on national tsunami centres and the free exchange of necessary data among countries.

Several countries have already announced plans to build national tsunami warning systems, by upgrading ocean and earthquake observing systems and setting up tsunami warning centres. The decisions of the meeting will ensure that these plans develop in harmony, with common standards and under the coordination of the IOC.

Participants also agreed that the tsunami warning system had to include substantial awareness raising and public education, in order that warnings were understood and acted upon. The system also had to be well integrated into other types of warning systems and to national disaster management systems, consistent with the guidance of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

Moves to quickly establish an interim tsunami early warning service, first announced at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction held in Kobe, Hyogo, Japan, 18-22 January, also got the green light from the Paris meeting. This requires some straightforward upgrading of existing observation stations in the Indian Ocean and the provision of seismic and other advisory information from the Japan Meteorological Agency and the Hawaii-based Pacific Tsunami Warning Center.

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Countries will be able to receive, as an interim step, seismic data from April 1 from earthquake monitoring stations in Tokyo and Hawaii. Technicians will set up tidal gauges at six sites in the eastern Indian Ocean, near Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia and will upgrade 15 existing gauges sites. The data from these gauges will be freely exchanged with other countries.

“The meeting was very important, as it got the agreement of governments and technical experts alike for a common and coordinated approach, dispelling fears that a haphazard inferior system would develop, with some countries racing ahead, and others left behind” says Reid Basher, from the ISDR Platform for the Promotion of Early Warning in Bonn, Germany. “The United Nations did its work well here,” he said. “In addition, the interim warning service will provide some peace of mind until the fully fledged system can be implemented over the next year or so.”

Detailed work can now commence of the planning and implementation of a full system that will comprise a comprehensive network of earthquake gauges, and ocean seabed sensors and gauges, the development of national tsunami warning centres in each country, up to 26 in all, the development of regional or sub-regional centres to provide advanced analysis of data and warnings, and supporting public education.

The Paris meeting participants agreed to meet again in Mauritius on 14-16 April to settle the details of the plans and to clarify the responsibilities of national, sub-regional and regional warning centres.

UNESCO-IOC and ISDR-PPEW are working closely together to support progress on the tsunami early warning system, blending the tsunami expertise and leadership of the IOC with the disaster expertise and networks of the ISDR and its early warning platform.

According to Reid Basher “We in ISDR try to emphasise that the science and technology has to be complemented by matching efforts to not only educate and prepare local communities but also to strengthen the capacities of the authorities to inform the public and better manage and reduce the impacts of disasters”.

Countries at the meeting from other parts of the world also expressed their eagerness to set up or upgrade similar tsunami early warning systems for the South China Sea, the South Pacific Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, Atlantic Ocean, and Mediterranean regions, all of which also have a history of damaging tsunamis.

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