



PRESS RELEASE

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Rapid, National, Local and Community Response is Key to Saving Lives during a Tsunami

Bali, Indonesia, 02 August 2006—“ Major gaps and weaknesses urgently need to be dealt with at the national, local and community levels to ensure that early warning systems –especially in the event of a fast-moving tsunami– save the lives and livelihoods of coastal inhabitants” said Joe Chung, of the U.N. International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, at the end of a three-day conference on early warning systems in the Indian Ocean.

National tsunami experts and disaster reduction representatives from the Indian Ocean countries met in Bali, Indonesia from 30 July to 2 August as part of the third session of the Intergovernmental Coordination Group for the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System (ICG-IOTWS), which comprises all countries bordering the Indian Ocean in Asia and Africa. A side event organized by the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR) and funded by Australia discussed how to improve preparedness and response at the community level, based on the lessons learned from the 26 December 2004 and 17 July 2006 tsunamis.

The Java tsunami was the first real test of the regional Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning System (IOTWS). The system has been under development since the 26 December 2004 tsunami under the coordination of UNESCO’s Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) and was operational since the beginning of July 2006.

Although the tsunami warning system functioned as expected at the regional, technical, and scientific levels, the speed with which the tsunami struck the coast of Java (approximately 40 minutes from the time the earthquake struck) left little time for coastal communities to receive and act on official warnings. Moreover, the Indonesian national authorities have said that their communications systems and dissemination procedures were inadequate for Java and most people did not receive any official warning.

“ Technology - while important - is not enough on its own to save lives. It has to be an integrated part of the local communities’ warning and response capabilities,” says Salvano Briceño, Director of the secretariat of the UN/ISDR in Geneva.

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The tsunami killed over 500 people and about 300 are still missing.

The Bali meeting identified five crucial elements that can help mobilize communities most affected to respond properly and rapidly to the first signs of a tsunami:

1. Education and public awareness are critical, especially for coastal communities close to the earthquake zones who do not have enough time to rely on science-based warnings.
2. More investments are necessary to develop rapid and functional communications between the national authorities and the community levels.
3. Strengthened capacities at the national and local level, such as the organization of simulation exercises, will help communities most affected to respond quickly to warnings.
4. Scientific and technological improvements are needed to assess and act more rapidly the potentially damaging nature of short-range events like the 17 July tsunami.
5. During the recovery stage, re-building physical infrastructure to improve and strengthen resilience to future tsunamis is crucial.

The Intergovernmental Coordination Group, decided at Bali to set up a new working group on mitigation, preparedness and response, in order to help national efforts to strengthen communities' capacities to protect lives and livelihoods from tsunamis and other hazards. The establishment of this working group, supported by UN/ISDR, will help to integrate these lessons learned into the existing regional tsunami early warning system.