



PRESS RELEASE

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Heightened awareness allows effective evacuations following Sumatra earthquake

Three months after the 26 December tsunami, another massive earthquake took place Monday on the island of Nias, Indonesia killing hundreds of people and causing considerable destruction of infrastructure.

The 8.7 magnitude quake could have triggered a tsunami and for hours, authorities stayed in alert in the region.

“Fortunately the tsunami did not occur although warnings were disseminated both through formal and informal channels and most coastal zones effectively evacuated” says Salvano Briceño, Director of the secretariat for the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. “This highlights again that high levels of awareness and well prepared communities are crucial for an effective response when natural hazards occur.”

Since the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR) in Kobe in January, UNESCO/IOC and ISDR/ Platform for the Promotion of Early Warning (PPEW) are working closely together to establish a regional early warning system in the Indian Ocean. This comprehensive system will be functional by the end of 2006.

In the meantime, coordinated efforts to establish an interim warning system, supported by the Japanese Meteorological Agency (JMA) and the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre (PTWC) are carried out and will be operational as of 1 April of this year.

In the case of last night’s earthquake, tsunami alerts were given after 40 minutes of the quake by the Japan Meteorology Agency to 6 Indian Ocean countries including India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Tourists were evacuated from risk prone areas in Thailand, while people left their homes in Sri Lanka and India and moved to safer ground. The high level of awareness, since the 26 December, allowed people to react swiftly and in an informed manner.

For more information, please contact:

Brigitte Leoni, Media Relations

Inter-agency secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR)

Tel: +41 22 917 4968

Email: leonib@un.org

www.unisdr.org



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Two tidal gauges in the region (Cocos Islands and Colombo) recorded slight abnormal sea level changes, indicating that the earthquake had triggered only a small, non-threatening tsunami. Countries in the region subsequently ended the alert phases 3 to 6 hours following the event.

A recent intergovernmental meeting in Paris, 3-8 March, estimated that additional tidal gauges are required in the eastern Indian Ocean, near Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia and 15 existing gauges need to be upgraded. The data from these gauges will be freely exchanged between countries.

Country representatives and experts will meet in Mauritius on 14-16 April to further the details of a plan of action and to clarify the responsibilities of national, subregional and regional requirements for a tsunami early warning systems in the Indian Ocean.

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