



VIEWPOINT

Leaders of Indonesia's Simeulue community received a prestigious U.N. award

BANGKOK , October 13 2005- Leaders of Indonesia's Simeulue community received a prestigious U.N. award here for saving tens of thousands of lives during the Dec. 26 **tsunami**.

Thanks to faith in their own knowledge of how the sea behaves and the reaction of buffaloes ahead of the **tsunami**, this community of some 80,500 people fled the shore for nearby hills on that fateful Sunday morning.

Consequently, only seven people died from the **tsunami** in this island community, while 163,795 died across the rest of Indonesia 's northern Aceh province.

The community received the United Nations Sasakawa Award for Disaster Reduction. "The story of what happens to the sea before a **tsunami** and how the buffaloes rush towards the hills has been shared by families for years along with other stories about our ancestors," a soft-spoken Mohamed Ridwan, a leader of the Simeulue community, said after receiving the award.

This oral narrative had been shaped by the destruction that shook this community of farmers, fishermen and traders when an earthquake followed by a **tsunami** hit the islanders in 1907, killing thousands.

"Since then we have learned how to escape, and last December it took about 30 minutes to get to the higher ground," Ridwan, 53, secretary of the Simeuleu district region, explained during an interview.

The flight and the thousands of lives saved as a result are all the more remarkable given that Simeulue people were located close to the epicenter of the powerful Indian Ocean earthquake that triggered the **tsunami**.

"What happened in Simeuleu was a unique achievement in the midst of all the death in Aceh due to the **tsunami**," Nannie Hudawati, a senior official at Indonesia 's national disaster management office, told IPS. "It was the one community that had its own traditional way of avoiding the impact of a **tsunami**."

Two other communities also stood out for relying on traditional knowledge and fleeing to safety -- the sea gypsies along Thailand 's southern coast and the tribal communities living on India 's remote Andaman and Nicobar islands .

Sensing the change in their natural surroundings minutes before the deadly ocean waves struck, these tribal people fled the shore for higher ground, saving thousands of lives.

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Last year's **tsunami** was the world's worst natural disaster, decimating populations on the coastlines in 11 countries across the Indian Ocean , resulting in 224,495 deaths and leaving millions homeless.

Indonesia 's Aceh province was the worst hit, with 163,795 deaths, followed by **Sri Lanka** , with 35,399 deaths, India , with 16,389 deaths, and Thailand , with 8,345 deaths, among the other affected nations.

According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Asia accounts for the most number of people killed during natural disasters over the past decade -- an estimated 702,775 people.

Asia is also the where the most number of disasters have struck since 1995. The 2,459 disasters ranged from landslides, droughts and earthquakes to tsunamis, floods, volcanic eruptions and windstorms, says the IFRC's annual "World Disasters Report 2005," released earlier this month.

The powerful earthquake this week in the mountainous terrain that Pakistan and India share comes as one more reminder of how vulnerable Asian communities are to natural disasters.

The toll from the weekend's disaster was inching towards the 100,000 mark, with many more injured, according to Pakistani officials.

"There is no denying that indigenous knowledge and local traditions are vital to saving lives during natural disasters," says Rene Jinon, acting head of IFRC's Southeast Asia disaster management unit. "Instead of negating it we have to build on it, and such knowledge is quite extensive in this region."

Communities in Cambodia , the Philippines , East Timor, Indonesia, Thailand , Laos and Vietnam are among the few that place faith in the insights of their ancestors to escape the ravages of floods, landslides, typhoons and volcanic eruptions.

Nevertheless, the bias among governments is still toward satellite mappings and "high-tech gizmos," Jinon added during an interview. "Within communities also this generates a debate, about whose advice they should follow: the warnings of the scientific community or what flows from local knowledge."

In the wake of disasters like the **tsunami**, the U.N. has entered the debate by taking a closer and more sympathetic look at the unique traditions of people like the Simeulue.

"We are putting together a report that looks at the successful lessons communities using traditional knowledge offer us," says Joseph Chung, senior regional officer for Asia and the Pacific at the U.N. International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. "It will include accounts of communities that build houses to withstand earthquakes."

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According to Chung, the remarkable achievement of the Simeulue should resonate in other forms, too, such as local communities being empowered to develop their own contemporary methods to escape disasters.

"You can have all the technology in the world but if the community doesn't respond in time, it is useless," he said. "And governments are often slow to respond, because they are far away and removed from the affected communities."

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