

Extent of tsunami destruction along African coast slowly emerges

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The tsunami wave generated by the undersea earthquake off the coast of Indonesia on December 26 has caused death and destruction along the northeast coast of Africa. Although on a much smaller scale than that experienced in Asian countries, there has been little media coverage, with virtually nothing on Western television outlets.

According to press reports, one person was killed in the Seychelles, one in Kenya and 13 in Tanzania. Worst affected was Somalia where, according to the BBC News website, nearly 300 people have died.

In Tanzania, it is reported that mainly children were killed by the giant wave but the death toll also included three fishermen who drowned when the tsunami capsized their boat. Tanzanian fishermen have been reluctant to put to sea since the tsunami and this has led to a shortage of fish, with prices doubling or trebling. For many Tanzanians living along the coast, fish is their major source of protein.

Despite being more than 3,000 miles from the earthquake epicentre, the tsunami waves travelled across the Indian Ocean. The time gap between the generation of the tsunami and its eventual landfall in Africa, gave Kenyan authorities time to close all the beaches and minimise the loss of life and injuries. There was infrastructure damage, however, in the Seychelles and more than a 1,000 people made homeless in Madagascar.

Most of the destruction in Somalia occurred in the semi-autonomous Puntland region, on the northeast coast, where an estimated 85 percent of the infrastructure has been damaged. The Hafun Peninsula has been particularly affected, with a road bridge connecting the peninsula to the mainland washed away. Other settlements in the Puntland region, including Bandar, Murdayo, Rass Casey and Bargul, were also

hit.

A recent report in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper cited Hafun mayor, Abshir Abdi Tangi, saying that 51 fishing boats had been destroyed, with dozens more missing. The tsunami hit during the peak fishing season when many Somalis move to the coast and live in temporary fishing settlements. In most cases they have lost their fishing equipment, all their belongings, and any means of livelihood.

In some areas the wave travelled inland for up to two miles along riverbeds. As well as destroying fishing boats and equipment, the salt water has also spoilt pastoral grasslands as well as wells and reservoirs. Access to safe fresh water is now difficult. Health problems, including pneumonia and diarrhoea, are reportedly spreading.

According to the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 18,000 households or around 54,000 people have been directly affected. While the UN has conducted aerial reconnaissance of the northeast, it said the survey did not provide a complete assessment because the area is remote and harsh and accessibility difficult. The UN estimates that nearly 1,200 homes and 2,400 boats have been destroyed.

United Nations Development Programme director for Somalia, El-Balla Hagona, explained that because Somalia has no "indigenous capacity to assess the damage... [this] placed that responsibility on the UN and its collaborators."

Thomas Thompson, a logistics officer with the UN World Food Programme, said the tsunami had compounded existing problems. "There is a need for us to act immediately," he said. The wave is the third natural disaster to devastate the area. Following a four-year drought, heavy rains caused floods and killed

many of the livestock that had survived the drought.

The UN launched a \$10 million appeal for Somalia last week, as part of the overall \$997 million tsunami fund. “[T]he tsunami represents a further assault on an already vulnerable population,” the UN declared. There is an urgent need for drinking water, food, medication and emergency shelter.

The UN World Food Programme is already in Somalia because of the drought. It says that it has distributed food to 12,000 people, but admits that over 30,000 are in urgent need.

The fact that Somalia has had no central government for the past 13 years and control of the country is in the hands of feuding warlords makes logistics difficult. This has been exacerbated by the wave itself destroying infrastructure. Supplies to the Puntland region have to be trucked in from the Somali Red Sea port of Bossaso—a journey of nearly 300 miles across harsh difficult terrain.

A two-year peace process to restore a national government is underway. Currently the president and his cabinet are based in Nairobi in neighbouring Kenya. Plans to move back to the Somali capital of Mogadishu are bogged down in talks to win over some warlords who have not yet signed up to the agreement.

The African Union is scheduled to dispatch troops to Mogadishu in the near future, before the return of President Abdullahi and his cabinet.



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