

Indonesia hit by another devastating earthquake

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30 March 2005

A massive earthquake off the west coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra has left hundreds of people confirmed dead and thousands homeless. News of the quake late on Monday night (local time) and fears of a repetition of the December 26 tsunami triggered a mass exodus from coastal areas in Indian Ocean countries.

While no significant tsunami formed, the huge tremor measuring 8.7 on the Richter scale laid waste to areas immediately adjacent to the epicentre. Indonesian Vice President Yusuf Kalla estimated that the death toll on the islands of Nias and Simeulue could be as high as 1,000 to 2,000 people. Television footage showed survivors in Gunungsitoli, the main town on Nias, frantically searching through the rubble of buildings searching for friends and relatives.

From the air, about a third of Gunungsitoli appears to have been flattened. There is no electricity or running water and damage to the local airport hampered relief operations yesterday. Deputy mayor Agus Mendrofa told the media that 10,000 of the town's population of 27,000 had fled to higher ground. "Gunungsitoli is now like a dead town. The situation is extreme panic," he explained in the London-based *Times*.

According to the *Australian*, 80 percent of the island's second largest town of Teluk Dalam has been destroyed. Town chief Ginding Nabari told the newspaper that at least 13 people were dead. "But there will be more," he said.

A UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) report yesterday put the death toll on Nias alone at 200, with more than 300 injured, many of them seriously. Around 1,780 people were officially registered as internally displaced, but the actual number of homeless is much higher. Media reports indicate that damaged roads and bridges are hindering emergency operations in the northern parts of the island, which were closer to the quake's epicentre. The island's population is between 500,000 and 700,000.

On the neighbouring island of Simeulue, 18,000 people out of a population of 78,000 are internally displaced. OCHA reported that many of the concrete buildings on the island had been destroyed. The initial toll was three dead and 47 injured at the Sinabang Hospital, but again disrupted transport and communications make any accurate assessment impossible.

Fears were held for the safety of an estimated 5,000

inhabitants of the Banyak islands—a chain of small, low-lying islands that were closest to the quake's epicentre. According to the OCHA report, initial aerial reconnaissance yesterday indicated little or no destruction. On the Sumatran mainland, the village of Singkil was badly hit, but no casualty reports have been released.

The quake, while less forceful than the December 26 tremor, was the world's eighth largest since 1900. It was felt in many parts of Sumatra and as far away as the west coast of Malaysia. As reports of the quake filtered out, there were chaotic scenes in the countries surrounding the Bay of Bengal. Throngs of people in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia and India attempted to flee to higher ground on foot, bicycle and motor vehicles. Conscious of the lack of official warning three months ago, many did not wait for alerts to be broadcast over TV and radio.

Rebuilding in many of the coastal towns and villages devastated by the December 26 tsunami that claimed over 300,000 lives is yet to even begin. Tens of thousands of survivors in these countries are still living in makeshift emergency camps, temporary accommodation or with relatives. They have been reduced to poverty, having lost their homes, possessions and livelihoods. The lack of assistance highlights the inadequacy of the much-vaunted international aid promised.

Superficially, the reaction of governments to the latest earthquake appeared markedly different from December. In Indonesia, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono immediately declared a state of emergency and postponed a visit to Australia in order to go to affected areas. Three months ago, his administration blocked international aid to the stricken province of Aceh and the Indonesian military took days before making an aerial reconnaissance of the devastated west coast of the island.

In Thailand, India and Sri Lanka, authorities issued immediate tsunami alerts and praised themselves for the promptness of their actions. Unlike last December, when he failed to make a statement on the tsunami tragedy for days, US President George Bush immediately expressed his condolences for the victims of the latest disaster. In Australia, Prime Minister John Howard followed suit, pledged \$1 million in financial assistance and dispatched military transport aircraft and a medical team to take part in relief efforts.

There is no doubt that these responses were purely for public consumption. All of these leaders are acutely aware that their obvious contempt and ineptitude last December provoked disgust and anger among ordinary working people around the world, who reacted in precisely the opposite fashion. But behind the latest official displays of concern lie the same indifference for the plight of the Asian masses.

Despite the obvious need, there is still no adequate tsunami warning system for the Indian Ocean. Some changes have been made over the past three months: the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre in Honolulu now has a list of contacts to alert in South and South East Asia; and each of the countries has put in place its own emergency and evacuation measures. Within 20 minutes of the latest quake, the Honolulu centre issued a bulletin warning of its “potential to generate a widely destructive tsunami” and advised evacuation of coastlines within 1,000 km of the epicentre.

In the absence of other information, the bulletin was certainly justified given the magnitude of the quake. But the makeshift character of the present warning system is highlighted by the failure of a tsunami to develop. Scientists are still speculating on the possible reasons: while the tremor was of a similar size to the December quake, it was in deeper water, was not as quite as large, did not extend for the same distance and may not have ruptured the seabed floor. Whatever the exact explanation, it is well known that not every undersea earthquake produces a tsunami. To determine accurately whether a tsunami has formed requires a network of tidal level monitors and deep-sea pressure sensors connected to a central monitoring centre—as is in place for the Pacific Ocean.

Despite a series of meetings over the past three months about the necessity of such a system, scientists on Monday were limited to largely the same equipment that was in place on December 26. The first confirmation that a tsunami had not formed was provided by a sea-level gauge on Cocos Island—halfway between Indonesia and Australia—some two and a half hours after the earthquake. “If we had [readings from] water-level instruments within the first half-hour to 45 minutes, we could have point-blank told people in Sri Lanka and Thailand, ‘Don’t worry,’” Barry Hirshorn, a geophysicist at the Honolulu centre, told a local newspaper.

Plans for an Indian Ocean tsunami warning system have bogged down in national rivalries and arguments over who will foot the costs. Both the Indian and Thai governments have announced their intention to build their “own” warning systems—ignoring the obvious need for regional and international coordination and cooperation. While Germany has offered to pay for the relatively modest \$35 million needed to build a warning system, it is unlikely to be operational before mid-2006.

A number of experts are warning, however, that there is a possibility of further large earthquakes in the same region. While unable to make accurate predictions of tremors, several

scientists have pointed out that the December 26 quake has generated new stresses in fault lines in the region, making new earthquakes more likely.

In fact, a scientific group at the University of Ulster published a paper less than two weeks ago, warning of new quakes in two specific areas. One was near the epicentre of Monday’s quake and the second was along a fault line running down the centre of Sumatra, including under the city of Banda Aceh. In comments at the time, Professor John McCloskey stressed the urgency of building an adequate warning system.

“The loss of much of the life in the December earthquake was avoidable,” he explained. “The science is well understood, the warning systems are in place in the Pacific region. The levels of preparedness, public awareness and education in this region are high and do save lives. Unfortunately the people of the Indian Ocean have neither benefitted from this knowledge nor from the available technology. Our results indicate unambiguously that there is a real danger of another earthquake in the region. It is vital that disaster fatigue does not delay the implementation of the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning System.”

Speaking after Monday’s tremor, McCloskey again warned against complacency. “We have all heard that lightning does not strike twice in the same place—but earthquakes do. One of the strongest observations in seismology is that earthquakes cluster in space and time. Where you have one earthquake you are likely to have others,” he said.

Prior to the December 26 tragedy, governments in the region and internationally for years ignored calls by scientists for an Indian Ocean tsunami warning system. There is no guarantee that the latest quake and expert appeals will accelerate plans for such a system. It is far more likely, once the immediate crisis has passed, that there will simply be a collective sigh of relief in ruling circles around the world. Just as tens of thousands of tsunami victims have been left struggling to survive as best they can, the plans to build a warning system, let alone construct buildings and infrastructure capable of withstanding natural disasters, will remain limited and half-hearted.



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