

Population given no warnings as tsunami hits Java, killing hundreds

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The southern coast of the Indonesian island of Java was hit by a two-metre high tsunami at about 4:15 pm local time last Monday. Despite receiving timely international warnings, Indonesian government ministries and agencies issued no warnings to the threatened areas.

The huge waves struck just over 18 months since the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami that killed 226,000 in the Indian Ocean region. Of these 165,708 died in Sumatra, most in them in Aceh province. Almost half a million people were made homeless in Indonesia alone.

As of midday Wednesday, 525 people have been confirmed dead in the latest disaster, with hundreds missing and more than 500 injured. More than 50,000 people were forced to flee their homes as the waves devastated coastal villages, flattening the homes of fisherman, tourist hotels and guesthouses and other buildings. Destruction extended inland for nearly a kilometre.

Most of the fatalities occurred around the resort area of Pangandaran in West Java province (about 260 km south-east of the capital Jakarta) as well as nearby Cilacap and Tasikmalaya. According to one report, many of those reported missing are from a local dam project. A small number of foreign tourists have been confirmed dead.

Media reports quoted locals and tourists who said they had received no warning. Fisherman Supratu told Associated Press (AP), “The police and local officials did not give us any warning whatsoever about the tsunami. Suddenly this big wall of water appeared and I started screaming and running.”

The earthquake that caused the tsunami measured 7.7 on the Richter scale, according to the United States Geological Survey. It occurred on the fault line south of Java on Monday at about 3:19 pm. Seventeen minutes later the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Hawaii issued a warning that this could generate a tsunami, that is, about 39 minutes before the deadly wave struck Java.

Local officials on Australian-controlled Christmas Island, 224 km from the earthquake’s epicentre, responded to this warning by moving 300 residents from low lying parts of the island.

According to an AP report, Indonesian science and technology minister Kusmayanto Kadiman admitted that officials received this warning, as well as one sent by the Japanese Meteorological Agency, but “we did not announce them” because they did not want to cause unnecessary alarm. “If it (the tsunami) did not occur, what would have happened?” he said.

A warning about the quake from Indonesia’s only sensor in Cilacap had also been sent “in real time” to the Meteorological and Geophysical Agency in Jakarta. Agency official Sugun told the British *Guardian* that no tsunami warning had been issued because “we were so busy monitoring all the aftershocks”.

Scientist Fauzi, head of the agency’s seismological and tsunami division, told the press that once government scientists calculated the real strength of the quake they tried to radio government offices in south Java but claimed that “there was no way we had the time”.

What is clear is that no arrangements were in place for warning people in the areas at risk. A statement by Indonesian vice president Jusuf Kalla, recorded by AP, highlights the official incompetence and indifference.

Arrogantly downplaying the dimensions of the tragedy, Kalla claimed there was no need for the government to have issued a tsunami warning. “After the quake occurred,” he said, “people ran to the hills, so that is the reason the number of victims is not as great as in Aceh. So in actual fact, there was a kind of natural warning system.”

By any standards the response of the Indonesian authorities to the disastrous events of last Monday borders on the criminal. That these officials have had over a year and a half to act on the lessons of the Boxing Day

catastrophe compounds their culpability a thousand fold.

Despite Kalla's self serving assessment, the real reasons for the fewer deaths than in 2004 lie with nature, not any insight or action taken by Indonesia's ruling elite. Geoscience Australia seismologist David Jepson told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Monday's earthquake was 1,000 times less powerful than the Richter scale 9 quake of 2004. Had the quake been as powerful this time, the results on the more heavily populated Java would have been far more devastating.

In 2004, worldwide public outrage followed the unnecessary deaths of so many, when a tsunami warning system of the type that exists in the Pacific region would have saved most of the lives lost. The Bush administration initially promised \$US15 million in relief money but public outcry forced Washington to pledge \$857 million, while private donations in the US reached \$1.48 billion. A similar pattern developed worldwide, with United Nations' figures showing total pledges to the Indian Ocean region reaching \$13.4 billion, of which \$5.1 billion came from private sources.

Once the 2004 events faded from the headlines, however, the major powers dropped their displays of concern and much of the promised cash failed to reach the affected areas. The Bush administration soon confined itself to assessing how the episode had helped rebuild its political relationship with the government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

The Howard government in Australia also seized the opportunity to improve relations after falling out over the Australian invasion of East Timor in 1999. Much of the \$700 million in "aid" promised by Canberra consisted of providing opportunities for Australian businesses in Indonesia.

Above all, the capitalist powers made no effort in dealing with the central issue raised by the events of December 2004—the need for an international tsunami warning system.

On the first anniversary of the tragedy the *World Socialist Web Site* warned: "Perhaps the most graphic exposure of the irrational character of the profit system is the fact that the whole terrible tragedy could happen again tomorrow. A year after the disaster there is still no tsunami warning system for the Indian Ocean, even though the technology involved is neither complex nor expensive. What is required is a coordinated international system of pressure sensors and water level gauges linked by reliable communications to a centre for the rapid processing, analysis and release of alerts" (See "One Year

After the Asian tsunami: an indictment of the profit system").

Instead, inadequate and inefficient national systems have been established. Driven by the economic importance of its tourist industry, the government of Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has set up warning towers on resort beaches to broadcast sirens and evacuation warnings in several languages when regional agencies issue alerts. Malaysia has installed two buoys off its coast designed to give one hour's warning to be spread by radio, TV and mobile phone messages.

Indonesian peoples welfare minister Aburizal Bakrie claims that the government is working on establishing its own tsunami warning system by 2009. But of the 22 warning buoys this system requires, only two were set up opposite Sumatra. An Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio report on Wednesday revealed that neither of these was functioning—one had been damaged and the other was in a warehouse, awaiting repair.

Research and Technology Ministry official Edi Prihantoro told the ABC that no funding had been pledged for the remaining 20 buoys.

While the tsunami wave generated last Monday was a natural phenomenon its consequences—the tragic losses of lives and livelihoods—are social in character. Pacific Tsunami Warning Center Director Charles McCreery says that an effective warning system for the Indian Ocean would only cost some tens of millions of dollars to set up and a few million each year to run.

This cost would constitute a tiny fraction of the profits being extracted from India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia each year by the transnational corporations based in Europe, North America, Japan and Australia. The fact that the latest tragedy took place after the terrible warning of Boxing Day 2004 is a further indictment of this system and a warning that nothing is being done to prevent even greater disasters in the future.



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