

Tidal wave toll tops 21,000 in southern Asia

Millions left homeless; international aid promised

The Associated Press

Updated: 9:14 a.m. ET Dec. 27, 2004

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka - Rescuers on Monday piled up bodies along coastlines devastated by a tsunami that obliterated seaside towns in Asia and Africa, killing 21,000 people in nine countries. Hundreds of children were buried in mass graves in India, and morgues and hospitals struggled to cope with the catastrophe.

The death toll mounted sharply Monday, a day after the 9.0-magnitude quake struck deep beneath the Indian Ocean off the coast of Indonesia. It was the most powerful quake in four decades.

The waves sped away from the epicenter at over 500 mph before crashing into the region's shorelines, sweeping people and fishing villages out to sea. Millions were displaced from their homes and thousands were missing.

Fear of disease outbreaks

Officials said the death toll would continue to rise, and the International Red Cross said it was concerned about waterborne diseases. [International aid agencies rushed](#) to get food, shelter and clean water to the affected areas.

Sri Lanka said just over 10,000 people were killed along its coastlines, and Tamil rebels said 2,000 people died in territory under their control, bringing that country's toll to more than 12,000.

Indonesia reported about 5,000 deaths and India 3,000. Thailand — a Western tourist hotspot — said hundreds were dead and thousands missing. Deaths were also reported in Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Bangladesh and even in Somalia, 3,000 miles away in Africa.

On the remote Car Nicobar island south of India, Police Chief S.B. Deol told New Delhi Television he had reports that another 3,000 people may have died. If confirmed, that would raise India's death toll to 6,000 and the overall number to 23,900.

"The Andaman and Nicobar islands have been really badly hit," said Hakan Sandbladh, senior health officer at the Geneva headquarters of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

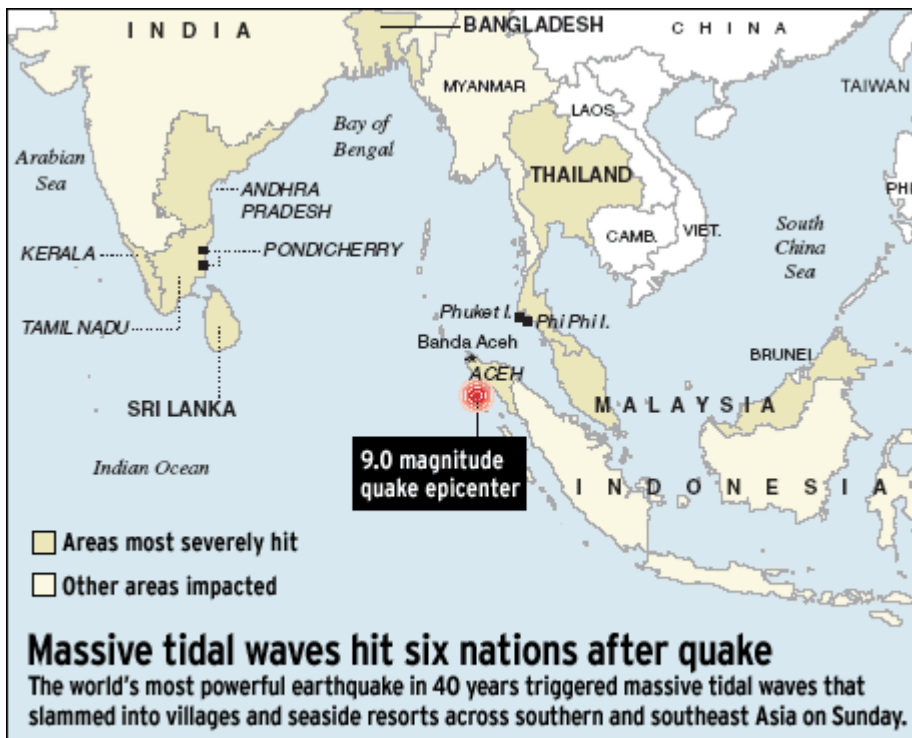
In Banda Aceh, Indonesia, 150 miles from the quake's epicenter, dozens of bloated bodies littered the streets as soldiers and desperate relatives searched for survivors Monday. Some 500 bodies collected by emergency workers lay under plastic tents, rotting in the tropical heat.

"We have ordered 15,000 troops into the field to search for survivors," said military spokesman Edy Sulistiadi. "They are mostly retrieving corpses."

Widespread destruction

Refugees in nearby Lhokseumawe, many of whom had spent the night sleeping outside on open ground, complained that little or no aid had reached them. The city's hospital said it was running out of medicine.

The Indian state of Tamil Nadu was also hit hard, with thousands of deaths reported. Chief Minister Jayaram Jayalalitha called the scene "an extraordinary calamity of such colossal proportions that the damage has been unprecedented."



Nearby beaches resembled open-air mortuaries as fishermen's bodies washed ashore, and retreating waters left behind others killed inland. In Cuddalore, red-eyed parents held a mass burial for more than 150 children. About half of the nearly 400 who perished in the town were youngsters, leaving townspeople in stunned bereavement.

The tsunamis came without warning. Witnesses said sea waters at first retreated far out into the ocean, only to return at a vicious pace. Some regions reported a crashing wall of water 20 feet high.

"The water went back, back, back, so far away, and everyone wondered what it was — a full moon or what? Then we saw the wave come, and we ran," said Katri Seppanen, who was in Thailand, on Phuket island's popular Patong beach.

Millions homeless

Sri Lanka and Indonesia had at least a million people each driven from their homes. Warships in Thailand steamed to remote tropical island resorts to search for survivors as air force helicopters in Sri Lanka and India rushed food and medicine to stricken areas.

In Indonesia, villagers near northern Lhokseumawe picked through the debris of their ruined houses amid the smell of decomposing bodies.

One man, Rajali, said his wife and two children were killed and that he couldn't find dry ground to bury them. Islamic tradition demands that the deceased be buried as soon as possible.

"What shall I do?" said the 55-year-old, who like many Indonesians goes by a single name. "I don't know where to bury my wife and children."

Dozens of bodies still clad in swimming trunks lined beaches in Thailand. Among the dead was the Thai-American grandson of King Bhumipol Adulyadej, officials said. Poom Jensen, 21, was reportedly jet skiing when the tidal wave struck.

In Sri Lanka — an island nation some 1,000 miles west of the epicenter — about 25,000 troops were deployed to crack down on sporadic, small-scale looting and to help in rescue efforts. About 200 inmates took advantage of the chaos, escaping from a prison in coastal Matara.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the quake's magnitude was 9.0 — the strongest since a 9.2 magnitude temblor in Alaska in 1964 and the fourth-largest in a century. The quake was more than 6 miles deep and was followed by a half-dozen powerful aftershocks. A 620-mile section of a geological plate shifted, triggering the sudden displacement of water.

International aid promised

Countries around the world were touched. Italy reported 11 of citizens had died; Norway 10; Britain four; the United States and Denmark three each; France, Sweden and Belgium two each; and New Zealand one.

Those numbers would likely rise. Sri Lanka said 72 foreign tourists were killed there. In Thailand, 35 of the dead were identified as foreigners.

President Bush expressed his condolences over the "terrible loss of life and suffering." From the Vatican, Pope John Paul II led appeals for aid for victims, and the 25-nation European Union promised to quickly deliver \$4 million.

Aid agencies and governments around the world began [pouring relief supplies into the region](#). Japan, China and Russia were among the countries sending teams of experts.

Jasmine Whitbread, international director of the aid group Oxfam, warned that without swift action, more people could die. "The flood waters will have contaminated drinking water and food will be scarce," she said.

In Thailand, Gen. Chaisit Shinawatra, the army chief, said the United States has offered to send troops stationed in Japan's Okinawa island to assist. Thailand was considering the offer.

Rare, deadly occurrence

Tsunamis as large as Sunday's happen only a few times a century. A tsunami is a series of traveling ocean waves generated by geological disturbances near the ocean floor. With nothing to stop them, the waves can race across the ocean like the crack of a bullwhip, gaining momentum over thousands of miles.

An international tsunami warning system was started in 1965, after the Alaska quake, designed to advise coastal communities of a potentially killer wave.

Member states include all the major Pacific rim nations in North America, Asia and South America. But because tsunamis are rare in the Indian Ocean, India and Sri Lanka are not part of the system. Scientists said the death toll would have been reduced if they had been.

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FREE VIDEO



Tsunami warnings
Dec. 27: Waverly Person, a geophysicist with the US Geological Survey, says lives could have been saved following the earthquake in Asia if there had been a tsunami warning system in place.

Today show

Lack of
tidal-
wave
warnings
faulted

**Indian Ocean
lacks critical
tide sensors**

The Associated Press

Updated: 8:36 a.m. ET Dec. 27, 2004

Asian officials conceded Monday that they failed to issue broad public warnings immediately after a massive undersea earthquake in Indonesia, which could have saved countless lives from the subsequent giant waves that smashed into nine countries.

But governments insisted they did not know the true nature of the threat because there was no international system in place to track tidal waves in the Indian Ocean — an area where they are rare — and they can't afford to buy sophisticated equipment to build one.

And what warnings there were came too little, too late.

The magnitude 9.0 earthquake — the largest in 40 years — shifted huge geological plates beneath the sea northwest of Sumatra island, causing a massive and sudden displacement of millions on tons of water.

Little warning

Indonesia villages closest to the temblor's epicenter were swamped within minutes, but elsewhere the waves radiated outwards, gathering speed and ferocity until they made landfall. Waves began pummeling southern Thailand about one hour after the earthquake. After 2½ hours, the torrents had traveled some 1,000 miles and slammed India and Sri Lanka. Malaysia, the Maldives, Myanmar, and Bangladesh were also hit. Eventually they struck Somalia, on the east coast of Africa.

The death toll Monday stood at nearly 20,000, with millions left homeless.

Indonesian officials said they had no way to know that the earthquake had caused the earthquake-driven waves, or tsunamis, or how dangerous they might have been.

"Unfortunately, we have no equipment here that can warn about tsunamis," said Budi Waluyo, an official with Indonesia's Meteorology and Geophysics Agency. "The instruments are very expensive and we don't have money to buy them."

Lack of tsunami warning blasted

But Thammasarote Smith, a former senior forecaster at Thailand's Meteorological Department, said governments could have done much more to warn people about the danger.

"The department had up to an hour to announce the emergency message and evacuate people but they failed to do so," Thammasarote was quoted as saying in The Bangkok Post newspaper. "It is true that an earthquake is unpredictable but a tsunami, which occurs after an earthquake, is predictable."

Kathawudhi Marlairojanasiri, the department's chief weather forecaster, said it had sent out warnings through radio and television from 9 a.m. on Sunday about a possible undertow along the southwest coast of Thailand, where tens of thousands of foreign tourists were vacationing.

But the warnings came after the first waves hit. A Web site warning went up three hours later — but by then, at least 700 people had died in Thailand, including a jet-skiing grandson of revered monarch King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Sulamee Prachuab, department's Seismological Bureau, said the department could not give a real-time warning because it did not have the satellite technology to do it.

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra refused to answer reporters' questions Tuesday about tsunami alerts.

But Australian Prime Minister John Howard said he would investigate what role his country could play in setting up an Indian Ocean warning system. One Australian official said at least a year would be needed to set one up.

Region lacked sensors

Scientists said seismic networks in the region recorded Sunday's earthquake, but without wave sensors in oceans that would have tracked the path of the waves, there was just no way to determine the direction a tsunami would travel.

"If they had tidal gauges and a tsunami warning system, many people who died would have been saved," said Waverly Person, director of the U.S. Geological Survey national earthquake information service in Golden, Colo.

"They could have tracked the waves," he said. "They won't tell you how high the waves will be, but they can tell you when they will hit. Local authorities can warn citizens to get off the coast."

Such a system presumes, however, an organized communication system and widely understood procedures and discipline by hotel operators, fishing villages, and local authorities to clear the coastline quickly in case of a coming disaster.

Most of developing Asia lacks such infrastructure, and casualties were by far highest in three highly impoverished areas — the coasts of eastern Sri Lanka and southeastern India, and the northern tip of Indonesia's Sumatra island.

An international warning system in the Pacific was started in 1965, the year after tsunamis associated with a magnitude 9.2 temblor struck

Alaska in 1964. It is administered by the U.S.-based National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Member states include all the major Pacific rim nations in North America, Asia and South America, as well as the Pacific islands, Australia and New Zealand.

Tsunamis occur only occasionally, but they are much rarer in the Indian Ocean than the Pacific, where one occurs every few years.

Phil McFadden, chief scientist with the government-funded Geoscience Australia, said that places close to the epicenter of the earthquake would have been hit so quickly that any warning would have come too late.

But if there had been a Pacific-style alert system covering the Indian Ocean, "there would have been time for people in Sri Lanka, across in the Maldives or somewhere like that to have done something about it," he said.

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Aid teams rush to southern Asia

Fear grows about contaminated drinking water

The Associated Press

Updated: 4:17 a.m. ET Dec. 27, 2004

ROME - Aid teams from around the world rushed to southern Asian countries devastated by tidal waves, warning that anything less than an urgent response would add many more deaths to the already catastrophic toll.

Pope John Paul II urged the international community to help after a 9.0-magnitude earthquake Sunday off the Indonesian island of Sumatra — the largest in 40 years — triggered tidal waves up to 20 feet high that obliterated villages and seaside resorts in eight countries.

He said the "enormous tragedy" had saddened the Christmas holiday.

'Months to come'

The International Red Cross in Geneva appealed for donations in cash, relief goods or services.

"We are in for a big emergency disaster response, and we will be at it for many months to come," said David Alexander, international director of the British Red Cross.

The United Nations sent disaster relief experts to the region and said it would give emergency cash grants to governments for immediate humanitarian needs — portable sanitation facilities, medical supplies, tents and helicopters for evacuation of people.

Jasmine Whitbread, international director of the aid group Oxfam, warned that without swift action, more people could die in the aftermath. "The flood waters will have contaminated drinking water and food will be scarce," she said.

Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India were hardest hit — with thousands of deaths in each country and widespread destruction. Thailand, Malaysia and Bangladesh also reported deaths.

On Monday, Australia's Foreign Minister Alexander Downer pledged \$7.7 million to international aid agencies.

Japan sent a 21-person disaster relief team, including doctors and nurses, to Sri Lanka with medical supplies, drinking water and tents capable of accommodating up to 1,000 people, the Foreign Ministry said.

China was preparing to dispatch to Indonesia a team of more than 40 experts for relief and rescue work, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

In Britain, three charities — Save the Children, World Vision and Christian Aid — were flying out teams to help workers already in Sri Lanka and India and sending money to region.

"For all the huge advances in the control of our lives through science and technology, an earthquake on this scale is truly humbling as well as profoundly tragic," said British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw.

Appeals for help

Save the Children said it was mobilizing response teams and had started coordinating with aid agencies to provide relief supplies.

"We are urging the American public to assist us in this critical effort," said Rudy Von Bernuth, who is coordinating Save the Children's emergency response effort to the region.

The Italian Foreign Ministry's crisis unit was coordinating EU aid efforts. The 25-nation EU will deliver \$4 million in emergency aid as a start, and Italy, Sweden, Germany, France and Britain were sending teams of technical experts and rescue workers.

"We are doing all we can to offer practical help and support," said Britain's International Development Secretary Hilary Benn.

In Austria, relief officials and charities such as Caritas and Volkshilfe made urgent appeals for cash donations.

"Once people are safe, they must be provided with meals, blankets and a roof over their heads," said Franz-Karl Pruessler, head of Caritas' Austria operation.

The Dutch Red Cross was flying in blankets, tents and medicine, with priority going to Sri Lanka, said Dutch Foreign Ministry spokesman Esther van Damme.

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II said she was "deeply saddened to learn of the dreadful situation" and offered her sympathy, as did the Netherlands' Queen Beatrix and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

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Disaster strikes vacationers in Thailand

Many European holidaymakers travel to beaches during holidays



Luis Ascui / Reuters

German brothers Marus and Kevin Boehn, right, sit in wheelchairs after being brought to Vachira Phuket Hospital after a tsunami hit the Thai resort island of Phuket on Sunday. Thousands of European tourists remain unaccounted for.

The Associated Press

Updated: 7:07 a.m. ET Dec. 27, 2004

PHI PHI ISLAND, Thailand - For thousands of young travelers from Sydney to Stockholm, this was the perfect tropical island, a palm-swaying dreamscape rising gently out of an emerald sea.

But tourists on Phi Phi had their paradise turned upside down on Sunday, when tidal waves triggered by a mammoth Indonesian earthquake rained down.

"It was like a scene from the apocalypse. There was litter everywhere — motorcycles, cars and dead bodies. I saw many dead babies on the beach," said Pascale Panuel, a French woman living in Tokyo.

As helicopters hovered overhead and large ferries and small speedboats arrived to evacuate stunned tourists and villagers, rescuers combed through the rubble of what were once bungalows, bars, Internet cafes and dive shops.

"Nobody was prepared. There was no warning. Lots of people were instantly dead," said Daniel Friberg, a 24-year-old from Stockholm, Sweden, who had spent two months on the island as a bartender.

Foreign governments worked feverishly on Monday to tally the number of their citizens believed dead or missing. Thousands of Europeans were vacationing in areas where the disaster struck, including Sri Lanka, Thailand and the Maldives.

Rome said at least 11 Italians were killed; Norway said 10 citizens died. Four Britons were reported killed. The United States and Denmark said three of their citizens died. France, Sweden and Belgium reported two deaths each, and New Zealand reported one death.

Those numbers would likely rise. Sri Lanka said 72 foreign tourists were killed there. In Thailand, 35 of the dead were identified as foreigners.

As many as 20,000 Swedes may have been in areas hit hard by the tidal waves, Swedish Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Nina Ersman said. Swedes, Danes, Norwegians and Finns traditionally flock to Thailand during their long, cold winters.

Foreign ministries across Europe set up hot lines for concerned relatives seeking information on family and friends in the region. Swiss Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Daniela Stoffel-Fatzer said a government hot line was overloaded by calls.

Also among the missing, injured or dead were nationals of South Korea, Japan, Germany, South Africa, Hong Kong, Australia, Malaysia, Mexico, Russia, and Chile, Thai media reported.

Frenchman Philippe Gilbert recounted gripping a tree and holding his breath when a giant wave hit his beachside bungalow in the southern Sri Lankan resort of Tangalle. He watched helplessly as his 4-year-old granddaughter disappeared in waves triggered by the 9.0-magnitude undersea quake off the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

"I was completely carried by an absolutely monstrous wave that towered over the bungalow," Gilbert said in a telephone interview broadcast by French television station LCI. "I lost my granddaughter in it."

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On a holy full-moon day, a mad dash to safety

Associated Press photographer offers firsthand account of disaster



Gemunu Amarasinghe / AP

Tidal waves wash through houses Sunday at Maddampegama, about 38 miles south of Colombo, Sri Lanka. Massive waves triggered by earthquakes crashed into villages along a wide stretch of Sri Lankan coastline on Sunday, killing thousands.

By Gemunu Amarasinghe

The Associated Press

Updated: 8:00 p.m. ET Dec. 26, 2004

Gemunu Amarasinghe, an Associated Press photographer based in Colombo, was caught in the tidal wave that hit Sri Lanka. This is his first-person account.

AMBLANGODA, Sri Lanka - The twisted limbs of the frail girl in a blue dress were caught in a garden fence by the sea. She may have already been dead, but no one stopped to check — there was too much tragedy going on all around, as the water kept coming.

When the tidal waves hit southern Sri Lanka, I had gone to the seaside to drop off my parents at a Buddhist ceremony. Sunday was the "Poya," or a full-moon day. We Buddhists believe that Buddha was born, attained enlightenment and died on a full-moon day, so such days are a time for his followers to spend in reflection.

It was after I dropped my parents off at the shrine in Amblangoda and I was driving back to the capital, Colombo, that I got a message on my cellular phone that some parts of coastal Sri Lanka had been hit by unnaturally big waves.

I didn't need the message to tell me. People were running everywhere, and the first waves hit the road.

The first waves were not huge, not too destructive. They brought fish to the shore, and people rushed to collect them. Smiling young boys ran with fish dangling in their hands.

But then another set of waves crashed ashore, much more powerful.

I parked my SUV and climbed on its roof, thinking I was safe there. I started taking pictures — my cameras are always with me in the car in case I stumble across a news picture. But the water kept rising. And rising. In a few minutes my SUV was submerged and I suddenly slipped into the water.

24 bodies in four miles

I struggled through the water, joining the crowds running for higher ground, some of them carrying their dead and injured. Whitecapped flood waters raced over the streets and between houses.

I counted 24 bodies in a stretch of just under four miles. Bodies of children were entangled in wire mesh used to barricade seaside homes. Bodies were carried up to the road, covered with sarongs and laid out for relatives to find. Rows and rows of women and men stood on the road, asking if anyone has seen their loved ones.

I was still in a daze, and the enormity of the tragedy still hadn't dawned on me until I came upon the girl in the blue dress, caught in a fence.

It was only when the flood waters began to recede, that it was possible to check and make sure. The girl, who appeared about 4 to 6 years old, was dead.

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