

Devastating tidal wave kills more than 13,000 in southern Asia

By Peter Symonds
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A tsunami or tidal wave, triggered by a huge earthquake yesterday off the coast of northwestern Sumatra, has devastated the coastlines of neighbouring countries, killing at least 13,500 people. The death toll is provisional and expected to rise further as relief and rescue workers comb through the wreckage, access isolated towns and villages and attempt to track down thousands of missing people.

The worst affected areas are the east coast of Sri Lanka, southern India and the Indonesian province of Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra, which was hit hard by the initial earthquake. Without warning, waves of up to 10 metres engulfed whole villages, sank fishing vessels and swept people, many of them young children and the elderly, out to sea. Many of the worst affected are the poorest—fishermen and others forced to live in vulnerable coastal communities.

The low-lying Maldives and the Andaman Islands were also struck. Coastal areas of Thailand, including the holiday resort island of Phuket, Malaysia and Burma were pounded by massive seas. At least two people were killed in Bangladesh. The tsunami impacted as far away as east Africa—6,000 kilometres to the west—including Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania. Nine people were killed in Somalia.

The National Earthquake Centre at the US Geological Survey measured the quake at 8.9 on the Richter Scale making it the largest since 1964 and the fifth largest since 1900. The main tremor hit just before 7 a.m. local time in Sumatra and was followed over the next two hours by a series of aftershocks, some of them major earthquakes in their own right.

The shockwaves were recorded almost instantaneously by seismological stations around the world, but neither Sri Lanka nor India is part of the international tsunami warning system. Although the wave took at least 90 minutes to travel to South Asia, no-one was alerted to the danger and nothing was done to avert the terrible tragedy that has killed thousands, left millions without homes, food or water, and wreaked havoc on crops and businesses.

The international warning system was established in the 1960s to assist in predicting the path and speed of tsunamis, which travel at high speed in deep water with no visible disturbance on the surface. Only when the shock waves reach shallow water do they climb to great heights and become visible.

Dr R.S. Dattatrayam, director (seismology) at the India Meteorological Department, explained to the *Times of India* that

his team had detected the quake, but could not predict the tidal wave. “We had indications pretty early in the morning, almost soon after it originated [in Indonesia]. But we were not prepared to gauge it. We don’t have the facilities for tsunami. We knew something would be hitting us, but couldn’t tell the time, the location and the intensity.”

Indian and Sri Lankan politicians have brushed aside questions about the lack of a warning system, saying that yesterday’s tsunami was the first in recent years to hit the subcontinent. There is no doubt, however, that thousands of lives could have been saved if immediate action had been taken to alert the most vulnerable areas. Belatedly, the Indian government has announced that it will initiate steps to join the tsunami-warning network.

The consequences of this inaction are nothing short of catastrophic.

Yesterday’s tsunami is the country’s worst natural disaster. As of late last night, the Sri Lankan Defence Ministry had confirmed the deaths of 2,484 people, but unofficial estimates put the figure much higher at around 5,000. The worst affected areas are along the east coast, much of which has been the focus of the country’s protracted 20-year civil war. By yesterday evening, the official death toll for Amparai was 900, for Batticaloa 300 and Trincomalee 300.

In Amparai, locals warned that many more are dead as whole villages have been destroyed. According to Hazir, a resident of Saindamarudu, the number killed could be anything between 3,000 to 4,000. Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader Rauff Hakeem said that there were 1,000 bodies in Saindamarudu alone. “There are bodies everywhere and more and more keep coming,” he said.

In areas under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the figure remains unknown. The Sri Lankan military estimates that 500 people died in the Mullaitivu district near the LTTE headquarters. But according to the LTTE-based Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO), the toll could be as high as 2,000 for the Mullaitivu district and another 1,000 in Jaffna district.

On the southern tip of the island, 866 were killed in Galle, 250 in Matara and 160 in Weligama. Matara police chief Chandana Wickremaratne told Agence France Press: “Hundreds of people were at the weekly Sunday fair when massive waves came in and washed away people. We don’t know what happened to them. There are many people who have seen bodies floating in the water. The water level is going down, but we have a huge problem of

water as sea water has got into the drinking water supply.”

Tourists in southern resorts were forced to seek shelter in stadiums and banquet halls. The roads to the capital Colombo were choked with traffic as residents and tourists fled the affected areas. Even though it lies on the west coast, Colombo was also hit, with a number of coastal areas swamped. According to the *Daily Mirror*, about 25 people, mostly young children, were swept away by huge waves in the northern suburbs. In Colombo harbour, large ships were battered and left listing to one side.

The scale of the disaster is yet to be accurately determined. The government estimated that at least one million people, or 5 percent of the population, have been affected. President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who is returning from Britain, has declared a “state of disaster”, authorised the use of the military and appealed for international aid.

Police imposed curfews in some areas aimed at preventing looting. But many people lack shelter and basic necessities such as food and clean water, leaving them vulnerable to disease. Even in Colombo, one angry resident exclaimed to the *Daily Mirror*: “We need water. We need food. Where are the leaders?”

At least 3,000 people were killed in southern India, with the state of Tamil Nadu accounting for over 1,700 dead. In the state capital of Madras, the official toll stood at 131 late yesterday. The *Hindu* explained: [T]he three major government hospitals here received the bodies in what seemed an unending row, of the young and the old; men, women and children. They all perished in the massive tide that swept away chunks of land, houses and huts, along with belongings, as also parked vehicles parked on the beach.”

In the fishing villages of Kanyakumari district, more than 400 fishermen and their family members were killed.

Hundreds of fishing boats were destroyed or washed out to sea. Another 400 died in Cuddalore district. According to an Associate Press report: “Seawater flooded into the streets of Cuddalore town, flipping over dozens of cars and leaving some vehicles perched on top of the road dividers.”

In Kakinada town, P. Ramanamurthy told the news agency: “I was shocked to see innumerable fishing boats flying on the shoulder of the waves, going back and forth as if made of paper. Many boats were upturned, but fishermen were still holding onto them. They also were pushed into the sea. I never imagined anything like this could happen.”

The southern states of Andra Pradesh and Kerala and Pondicherry were also hard hit. The fate of the population on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is still unclear. The low-lying group of islands was not only directly in the path of the tsunami but was also shaken by a major aftershock. S.B. Deol, Inspector General of Police, told the Indian press: “The situation is very grim. The death toll will go up to at least 1,000.”

As in previous natural disasters, the Indian government has made statements of concern and promised to provide assistance. The Indian airforce immediately flew to the Andaman Islands, where its base has been severely battered. Two naval ships were also dispatched. But the aid dispatched so far to alleviate the suffering of those left homeless in southern India has been limited. A belated advisory was issued to ships and fishermen to keep away from the coast for 24 hours.

A similar picture is emerging in Indonesia. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) put the latest official death toll at 4,422, but the number is certain to rise. Most of the victims are in the province of Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra, which has been the target of a huge military operation aimed at crushing separatist rebels and covering the population. Media coverage in the province has been subject to severe restrictions and censorship for more than a year.

At least 3,000 of the deaths are in the capital of Banda Aceh, which was hit by the earthquake as well as huge waves. Along the coast, entire villages were swallowed up. Most of the current reports are from Banda Aceh and the east coast. “There are also widespread reports of collapsed buildings in that same region, but as yet, most disturbingly, still no reports at all from Aceh’s west coast, an area around 100km from the quake’s centre, and where damage could be expected to be most severe,” the ABC reported.

Lieutenant Colonel Belyuni told the media last night: “We have stopped recovering bodies and will begin again first thing in the morning. It’s possible the death toll will mount because many of the corpses are still caught up trees.” According to Reuters, “TV pictures showed dazed villagers in rural areas carrying their belongings walking past scenes of devastation in Aceh. Buses and cars were overturned on the side of roads, some vehicles partially submerged in water. Thousands of people had been made homeless.”

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has declared a national disaster and promised aid to the victims. But there is no indication that his administration will in any way ease the current military occupation of the province and anti-democratic restrictions, which will seriously hamper the distribution of assistance to those in need.

Other countries in South and South East Asia have also been seriously affected. At least 310 people have been killed in Thailand, including in southern tourist resorts such as the island of Phuket. More than 1,300 have been injured in six provinces. “We are in chaos,” Somsak Sunwansujarit, deputy director of the county’s disaster department bluntly declared.

In Malaysia at least 53 people are dead and another 34 are missing after five metre waves battered the east coast of the country. Preliminary reports from Burma indicate at least 10 have died. The government in the Maldives has declared a state of emergency after the tidal wave swept over the islands and flooded two thirds of the capital. The death toll there stands at 15.

In the extensive coverage of this disaster, the international media and politicians treat the events as a terrible, but unavoidable tragedy. While earthquakes are notoriously difficult to predict, there is no doubt that the extent of the current tragedy could have been significantly lessened if prompt warnings had been issued and emergency aid and supplies prepared.

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