

# How tsunami warnings were ignored

By Khalid Hasan

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According to Symonds, seismologists in Thailand registered the Sumatran earthquake soon after it took place. Thai Meteorological Department officials convened an emergency meeting at which the danger of a tsunami was discussed, but the gathering decided not to issue a warning. With no tidal and other sensors in place, the meteorologists had no means of confirming whether a tsunami was on its way. Moreover, they knew there would be repercussions from both government and business if they issued a false warning. A major consideration was the peak tourist season and hotels running at full capacity. The meeting was convened nearly an hour before the tsunami battered the coastline of southern Thailand, along with the tourist resorts of Phuket and Phangnga.

Although Sri Lanka is not part of the Pacific tsunami warning system, through the efforts of the Hawaii station some officials were informed that a tsunami could be developing. The wave took about two hours to cross the Bay of Bengal and hit the island's east coast. Sri Lanka's Geological Survey and Mines Bureau received an alert from international bodies about the quake, but it took time to decipher the meaning of the messages. The head of the bureau compared an earthquake to a heart attack. "No one can predict it." When asked about tsunamis, he acknowledged that sometimes warnings could be made, but insisted that it was 'impossible' to do so on 26 December. According to Symonds, "What has been conclusively established is that the warning systems in Sri Lanka and throughout the region are totally inadequate. In the face of evidence of a massive earthquake and possible tsunami, authorities on the island were paralysed. Exactly who knew what, and when, will probably never be investigated. Even after the tsunami hit the east coast, no official action was taken to alert people elsewhere. In relatively shallow water, the wave took up to an hour to sweep around the island and hit the south and west coasts."

The Indian authorities confronted many of the same obstacles as their counterparts in other countries. But they had one advantage: the Indian

Air Force maintains a base on Andaman and Nicobar islands. It was not a matter of guessing whether or not a tsunami would form. Shortly after the earthquake, the wave swept over the islands and the air force base. According to a report, the airbase in Madras received communications from the Nicobar Islands an hour before the tsunami struck southern India. Indian Air Force Chief S Krishnaswamy told a newspaper, "The last message from Car Nicobar base was that the island is sinking and there is water all over." The chief instructed his assistant to alert New Delhi, which he did - by fax - to the home of the former science and technology minister. No further action was taken and no tsunami warning was issued for Madras or for other southern Indian towns and cities.

Commenting on the current crisis, Indian scientist Roddam Narasimha asked, "Even if we had the two-hour warning for tsunami, based on scientific data, what would the (Indian) administration do about it? Who would have called whom, and how would they have conveyed the warning to the people?" He pointed out that New Delhi had failed to learn anything from the cyclone that devastated the Indian state of Orissa several years ago. "The administration had a two-day advance warning about the Orissa super cyclone, but what happened? So, could they have done in two hours what they couldn't do in two days?"

Symonds writes that while Narasimha's indignation is justly directed at the Indian administration, his comments constitute an indictment of other regional governments and major powers, which routinely wash their hands of any responsibility for the plight of the masses of South Asia. The cost of establishing a tsunami warning system in the Indian Ocean is a pittance compared to the huge profits amassed by US, European and Japanese corporations through the exploitation of the region's cheap labour. In the final analysis, the absence of adequate disaster management systems is a product of the same social and economic order that condemns billions of people to wretched daily poverty and treats their sufferings as inevitable and unavoidable.

*Handwritten: WASH*

**WASHINGTON:** As more facts are known about the Asian tsunami that killed more than 150,000 people in 11 countries, it becomes clearer that had the response to the first reports of the massive earthquake that triggered the killer wave been more organised and less lethargic, far fewer people would have died.

A report by Peter Symonds run by the World Socialist Website on Monday quotes US geophysicist Barry Hirshorn in Honolulu as telling a local newspaper, "We started thinking about who we could call. We talked to the State Department Operations Centre and to the military. We called embassies. We talked to the navy in Sri Lanka, any local government official we could get hold of. The response in countries that lay in the tsunami's path was 'disorganised and lethargic'. The few who were aware of the dangers were hampered by lack of preparation, bureaucracy and inadequate infrastructure. Others either did not know how to interpret the warning signs, or were indifferent to them. None of the countries surrounding the Bay of Bengal issued an official warning, leaving millions of people completely at the mercy of the approaching waves."

In Northern Sumatra, everyone was caught unaware, including the police and military. While an official warning might have come too late for many on Aceh's western coast, the lack of basic education probably lifted the toll by thousands. After the tremor, the sea suddenly retreated hundreds of metres, but no one knew what this meant. Intrigued by the phenomenon, villagers, particularly children, followed the water out, picking up stranded fish, only to be engulfed by the wall of water that followed. According to the scientific magazine Nature, the only seismological equipment in Indonesia capable of providing an early warning was on the island of Java. Installed in 1996, it had no telephone line following an office relocation in 2000. Officials in Jakarta were alerted to the earthquake, but the absence of data from the specialised Java station prevented them from issuing a warning.