

UN reports rapid progress on Indian Ocean tsunami early warning system

Sálvano Briceño 22 June 2005 – A senior United Nations official today reported rapid progress on setting up a tsunami early warning system for the Indian Ocean which, had it existed at the time of last December's disaster, might have saved tens of thousands of the more than 200,000 lives lost to the giant waves that overwhelmed a dozen countries.

" If another tsunami would happen today in the region, people will be safer and will have a better chance to save their lives," the Director of the secretariat of the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), Sálvano Briceño, told the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization/Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (UNESCO/IOC) Assembly in Paris.

" In less than six months, the countries of the region and the international community have achieved in the Indian Ocean what took a decade or more in the Pacific Ocean," he said, referring to the only such system existing at present. "This progress has only been possible through strong leadership by Indian Ocean countries and UN agencies and the support of many donors."

A tsunami early warning system, based on quake and tidal sensors, speedy communications, alarm networks from radio to cell phones, and disaster preparedness training in vulnerable regions gives people time to flee to higher ground before the waves strike. In December, several hours passed between the quake that spawned the tsunami and landfall of the waves in many of the afflicted countries.

Mr. Briceño reported advances on many fronts, including upgrading of the Indian Ocean observing system under UNESCO/IOC leadership; improvements to regional telecommunications system for exchanging hazard data and warning messages by the UN World Meteorological Organization (WMO); and establishment of national tsunami centres by India, Indonesia, Thailand and other countries.

Other progress included the establishment of an interim tsunami advisory mechanism supported by the Japan Meteorological Agency and the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; workshops for television broadcasters and warning experts organized by the ISDR and the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union; and missions by tsunami and risk management experts, led by UNESCO/IOC, to help countries assess their needs for support.

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VIEWPOINT

" The foundations will soon be in place for a well-coordinated regional early warning system." Mr. Briceño said. "But much remains to be done – we now have to build capacities at local and national levels, so that warnings reach everyone at risk and the people know how to react."

Beyond the temporary improvements already in place, UNESCO/IOC is aiming to have a full tsunami early warning system operational in the Indian Ocean by June 2006.

In Bangkok today, civil defence policy-makers and system developers from the Asia-Pacific region opened a three-day meeting to explore improved regional cooperation in comprehensive disaster management.

The forum is sponsored by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Telecommunication Standardization Bureau (TSB/ITU) and the Asia-Pacific Multilateral Cooperation in Space Technology and Applications (APMCSTA).

In another tsunami-related development the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned today that fishermen on Indonesia's Sumatra island who survived the disaster are having their lives put at risk by the delivery of poorly constructed boats to replace the craft they lost.

" The quality of some of the boats being built by NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and local institutions is giving us serious concern, ranging from the sub-standard to the actually unsafe," the head of FAO's Fishing Technology Service, Jeremy Turner, said.

Meanwhile, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) has announced a \$2 million plan to restore the main port at Banda Aceh on Sumatra to working order by November, the first of several such rehabilitation projects planned by the agency for Aceh province.

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