

Tsunami toll feared

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was approaching 150,000, with a third or more of them believed to be children.

"We mourn, we cry, and our hearts weep, witnessing thousands of those killed left rigid in the streets," Indonesia President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said in a subdued New Year address.

Rescue teams say aid has started to reach stricken areas, six days after the monster waves obliterated beach towns and sucked tourists out to sea or inland in a torrent of mud and debris.

They were racing against time with an estimated 5 million people in the disaster areas facing grave difficulty getting food and clean water. Health authorities warned of a second wave of deaths from contagious diseases.

FLOODS IN SRI LANKA

PROMPT EVACUATIONS

Flash floods in eastern Sri Lanka on Yesterday forced the evacuation of 2,000 people from low-lying areas already affected by the tsunami, officials said. At least 15 camps sheltering some 30,000 tsunami survivors were hit by flash floods and evacuated in Sri Lanka's eastern district of Ampara, a regional official said.

Massive rains dumped 330 millimetres of water overnight in undulating the tsunami-devastated coastal region and crippled all relief operations. Pounding rain drenched the wrecked city of Banda Aceh and aftershocks shook the area yesterday, adding to the misery of homeless earthquake and tsunami survivors and heightening fears of waterborne diseases.

QUAKE ROCKS SUMATRA

An earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale struck under the sea off Indonesia's Sumatra Islands on Yesterday afternoon, the State Seismological Bureau of China said here.

The tremor took place at 0825 GMT, about 410 kilometres (240 miles) from the epicentre of last Sunday's earthquake, which measured 9.0 on the Richter scale and unleashed tsunamis which killed at least 125,000 people around Asia.

The tremor happened at 5.2 degrees north latitude and 92.3 degrees east longitude, Xinhua news agency, with its epicentre 350 kilometres west of Banda Aceh.

AID TOPS \$1B

Aid pledges for Asia's tsunami victims topped 1.1 billion dollars yesterday on a tide of New Year sympathy, but the United Nations warned it would take weeks for help to reach many survivors.

While the confirmed death toll from the catastrophe edged towards 126,000, relief operations were stalled by flash floods that submerged at least 15 camps in Sri Lanka and worst-hit Indonesia ordered aid to be expedited to isolated areas.

"Immediately channel this aid," Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono told soldiers as he surveyed a major backlog of aid that has built up at the airport in Banda Aceh, the nearly levelled capital of Aceh province.

Washington raised its aid tenfold on Friday to \$350 million (182 million pounds), bringing global emergency relief pledges to \$1.36 billion.

President Bush, under pressure over the pace and scale of American aid to Asian tsunami victims, abruptly raised the US contribution to \$350 million on Friday.

The White House suggested US assistance could rise still higher after a delegation headed by Secretary of State Colin Powell tours devastated areas next week and reports back to the president on the needs of an estimated 5 million tsunami survivors.

"Our contributions will continue to be revised as the full effects of this terrible tragedy become clearer," said the statement released by the White House while Bush vacationed at his ranch in Crawford, Texas.

Helicopters from the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier ferried relief supplies on Yesterday to Sumatra, an Indonesian island the size of Florida, where aid workers have encountered unimaginable scenes of devastation.

Japan increased its pledge of aid from \$30 million to \$500 million, the largest single nation donation yet. Britain has pledged \$95 million, Sweden \$75 million and Spain \$68 million.

With more than 80,000 confirmed deaths, Indonesia was the hardest hit after a 9.0-magnitude earthquake less than 150 km (95 miles) off the northern tip of Sumatra triggered a tsunami that ripped across the Indian Ocean to Africa.

Officials said the Indonesian figure may soar past 100,000. Sri Lanka has reported more than 28,500 deaths and India nearly 12,000.

Trying to understand the misery bewildered many.

"The scale of human tragedy in South Asia is beyond our ability to characterise," said Thomas Tighe, head of US aid group Direct Relief

International.

"The numerical death toll represents individual people, each someone's son or daughter, brother or sister, mother or father, or friend."

CANDLES AND WHITE ROSES

People held candles and white roses on Thailand's tsunami-hit island of Phuket at midnight on New Year's Eve, tearfully embracing as they grieved.

Celebrations -- an attempt to give life back some kind of normality -- stopped and partygoers lit incense sticks. The mournful Elton John song "Candle in the Wind" echoed through the resort.

Australia led the world in a global minute of silence, many cities cancelled festivities and trees on Paris's grand Champs Elysees, focal point of celebrations, were shrouded in black.

European tourists make up most of more than 2,200 foreigners killed in the disaster. Several thousand more were missing.

Relatives and friends flying to Asia in the hope that loved ones were alive scoured gruesome mosaics of photographs of distorted faces pinned on bulletin boards alongside personal possessions that someone might recognise.

Hundreds of thousands sheltered in makeshift tent camps around the Indian Ocean. Thirteen countries were hit by the tsunami.

"These are clothes given to us by rich people. They came last night," said Zukifli, a 65-year-old plantation worker wearing a sarong as he guffawed trying on a coat at a refugee centre in Banda Aceh in north Sumatra.

Much of the city of 400,000 people was levelled. Quake aftershocks have become a daily event since Sunday and they rattled homes and shelters overnight, sending many people scurrying outside into early morning rain.

One of the largest aftershocks since the tsunami quake six days ago was registered in the sea 215 miles (345 km) from the city on Yesterday, but was not expected to cause damage.

AIRPORT LOGJAMS

A multinational force of aid workers, military aircraft and ships descended on Asia. But lack of fuel for trucks, impassable roads and downed bridges hindered deliveries from airports and harbours to disaster areas.

"The aircraft going in and going out are just taxing the capacity to the very limit," said Michael Elmquist, head of the UN disaster relief operation in Indonesia.

In Sri Lanka, the worst hit nation after Indonesia, aid officials said Colombo airport was also being swamped by aid.

In Thailand, forensic experts tried to identify thousands of rotting corpses stacked in Buddhist temples. One aid group alone was sending 1,000 body bags.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell will tour devastated areas next week.

"The need is great and not just for immediate relief but for long-term reconstruction, rehabilitation, family support, economic support that's going to be needed for these countries to get back on their feet," Powell told reporters in New York.

Amid all the heartache were tales of miraculous survival.

A woman from an endangered tribe in India's Andaman and Nicobar islands survived for three days after the tsunami hit by clinging to a tree and eating its leaves, The Times of India reported.

"One by one, my uncles, aunts, all the children, went past me. I was hanging from one branch, like a bat, and the tree was rocking," said Brendina, a 28-year-old Jarawa tribal woman from Car Nicobar island where thousands are thought to have died.

KHALEDA MOURNS BRITISH DEATHS

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has expressed deepest sympathies and condolences to the British Prime Minister Tony Blair for the loss of lives of many Britons in the tidal surge from Tsunami in South Asia and South East Asia.

In a message to the British prime minister yesterday she said, "I am deeply grieved to learn that many Britons have lost their lives and many are still missing in the tidal surge that resulted from Tsunami in South Asia and South East Asia."

(Reuters, AFP, AP, BSS)

2 navy ships

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tsunami rescue operations and relief activities in the affected areas of the two countries.

Named the BNS Turag and the BNS Sangu, the two ships will bring much needed rescue equipment, medicine and relief goods to the two countries, a press release of Inter Service Public Relations said yesterday.

This latest effort is part of an ongoing rescue operation dubbed 'Operation SAARC Bandhan,' which has already dispatched to Sri Lanka and the Maldives two armed forces teams comprising 40 and 34 personnel respectively, the press release said.

In total, the two armed forces teams comprising 96 and 61 personnel respectively are being sent in phases, as part of the government's decision to assist the affected countries, the press release noted.

Missing docs

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Yaad and the then Soronai UP chairman and BNP leader Moiz Mollah raped a 19-year-old woman in Tanore in April 1988.

Reportedly bribed by the rapists, victim's uncle late Sayed Ali Sattar lodged a case with Tanore Police Station accusing one Muhammad Ali. Police too gave a charge sheet aliasing Ali of committing the rape. But later as the concerned tribunal summoned the victim to testify she contradicted the charge sheet and First Information Report. The tribunal then ordered further investigation. A supplementary charge sheet held the four BNP men guilty.

The rapists had challenged the tribunal order for further investigation in HC. In August 1995, the HC ruled in favour of further investigation, but the HC order went missing from judicial section under Rajshahi Collectorate delaying the legal proceedings for nine long years.

Another copy of the HC order reached Rajshahi on December 1 last year following the victim's petition.

Police nabbed Yaad Ali and Omar Ali, two of the four accused, following a home ministry directive on December 16 after The Daily Star published a report on the anomalies on December 13.

PM asks JCD

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leadership of the country.

The prime minister inaugurated the function by hoisting the national flag and releasing pigeons.

Party song 'Prothom Bangladesh Amar, Shech Bangladesh' was rendered as the prime minister appeared on the dais.

Our Sathkhira correspondent reports: Export-import through Bhomra land port remained suspended for the last three days as the C&F agents of both sides went on an indefinite strike Thursday.

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Additional Secretary Azizul Bari Helal presided over the function conducted by its General Secretary Azizul Bari Helal.

He regretted that the situation was reverse when her party was in the opposition and the then ruling party's front forces had been suspended for the last three days as the C&F agents of both sides went on an indefinite strike Thursday.

Sources said the Border Security Force nabbed Abdul Hamid, a staff of Allar Dan C&F agent, Thursday. The BSF also barred the C&F agents' representatives from crossing the border.

Over 100 trucks laden with perishable goods remained stranded on both sides. The government is also incurring heavy loss of revenue.

Major reshuffle

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The post of secretary to this ministry fell vacant following retirement of Lutfar Rahman Chowdhury, who went on LPR on December 31.

Additional Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture Abdul Aziz has been made Secretary in-charge of the Ministry of Water Resources.

Secretary in-charge of the Water Resources Ministry Dr Omar Faruq Khan has been made secretary in-charge of Parliament Secretariat.

The post of parliament secretary fell vacant with the expiry of Khandaker Fazlur Rahman's contract period on December 31.

Secretary in-charge of Primary and Mass Education Rafiqul Islam has been transferred to the Ministry of Food, Disaster Management and Relief Siddiquur Rahman to the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education.

The April 2004 meeting between the two ministers had concluded that the situation could be improved if the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE), Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), Bangladesh Jute Research Institute (BJRI) and Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation (BADC) are given the task of developing the seeds, train the farmers and provide support to them. The meeting also agreed that the DAE would produce 25 percent and the BADC 10 percent of the total demand for seeds during the current fiscal year.

The agriculture ministry's October proposal also stressed the role of the BRRI and BJRI in seed production. The proposal pointed out that the BADC alone needs 40 percent excess seeds from the beginning of the farming season to increase its supply of seeds to 10 percent from five percent now.

He said he cannot recall how many people worked for his company. "For further information, you may talk to our head office," he said declining to give details.

Grants, which works for various oil and gas companies including Petrobangla started working in the four districts in March last year for seismic survey. The findings will be handed over to Cairn for oil and gas exploration in these areas.

The company had hired 40 public relations officer, two safety officers, 10 assistant safety officer, and three medical officers and officers to run the management and accounts.

It also hired technical crew as foreman, recording officer, drilling foreman, surveyor, co-ordinator and other staff. In total there were 1,500 operations crew and 200 officers and employees.

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