

# Tsunami warnings spark collective nightmare

## Panic around Indian Ocean

AFP, Banda Aceh

It was as though hundreds of thousands of people around the Indian Ocean were suffering a collective nightmare: The tsunami was coming again.

From the coasts of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand to the shores of India and Sri Lanka, terrified people were jolted from their beds and homes as warnings rang out that another huge earthquake had struck and could spawn new killer waves.

Buildings on islands off the western coast of Indonesia's Sumatra island buckled as the 8.7 magnitude undersea temblor struck shortly before 11:15 pm local time, crushing those in the rubble.

Nearest the epicentre, at least

430 people were confirmed dead on the outlying Indonesian island of Nias. Hundreds of houses had collapsed in the island's capital Gumung Sitoli, officials said.

A three metre (10-foot) wave smashed into the island of Simeulue, off the coast of Sumatra, causing extensive damage, a military official said yesterday.

The wharf in the island's main port was badly damaged and the waves also affected the island's airport in the coastal town of Sinabang, he said.

In Banda Aceh on Sumatra, one of the cities worst hit by the devastating December 26 tsunamis, there was mass panic.

On foot, in cars and on motorcycles, thousands of residents fled for high ground, ignoring officials' pleas

for calm in their race for safety.

"When the earthquake happened, I rode my motorcycle to the airport because I was very afraid the tsunami would hit again," university student Heri told AFP.

Others tried to reach nearby hills as the screams of children echoed through streets that were temporarily plunged into darkness by a power outage.

Elsewhere around the Indian Ocean, radio and television sounded alerts. Police with loud hailer called on people to leave their homes. Mosques and temples issued warnings, while church bells rang out.

In Thailand, where more than 5,000 people died in the December 26 tsunamis, traffic started running bumper-to-bumper as people

streamed out of the famed Patong beach on the tourist island of Phuket and thousands gathered on nearby hills.

"I was told by my boss that the tsunami might happen, so I and other people went up to the hills nearby. We stayed there for hours, but we started going back after we were told it was safe," Phuket resident Apichart Kongkheun told Thai television.

Hundreds of people, with children yanked from their beds and still wearing pyjamas, gathered at the Phuket town hall for hours during the night, sleeping on the lawn and in pickups. But they all started heading home once authorities declared it safe.

### Minutes-old-baby joins the rush after quake sparks tsunami panic

AFP, New Delhi

A Indian baby just a few minutes old joined hundreds of thousands of people fleeing low-lying areas on the Indian Ocean coast after warnings that a massive quake off Indonesia could spark a new tsunami disaster.

A village nurse in the Akkaraipettai fishing hamlet of Tamil Nadu, southern India, told reporters that people began to panic when they heard about the earthquake on television.

"I was in the midst of delivering a baby when the news came," nurse S. Ranjani said, adding that as soon as the baby boy was born, mother, child and medical staff headed for higher ground.

Akkaraipettai saw heavy damage in the December tsunamis, with over 2,000 people perishing in a four kilometre (two mile) stretch.



An aerial view of the earthquake-hit area of Nias island yesterday. The under-sea quake west of Sumatra, which measured 8.7 on the Richter scale, killed at least 430 on two islands in Indonesia while several countries including India, Sri Lanka and Thailand issued tsunami alerts, prompting coastal dwellers to flee their home for higher ground amid scenes of chaos.



Indian coastline residents gather away from the seafloor following a tsunami alert in the southern Indian city of Chennai late Monday. India issued a tsunami alert along its entire south coast following a powerful quake off the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

## 'Downward earth movement failed to trigger tsunami'

AFP, London

The latest big earthquake to strike Southeast Asia did not cause a tsunami because the earth must have moved downwards rather than upwards, a British seismologist said yesterday.

David Booth of the British Geological Survey said he was "very surprised" that Monday's quake had not created a killer wave because it was almost similar in force and depth to the December 26 temblor that caused so much devastation.

"It appears Monday's quake caused a downward movement of the earth rather than the upwards jolt of the Boxing Day quake which caused a vertical displacement of

the ocean floor, which creates the tsunami," Booth said.

"On Boxing Day, the quake pushed the earth beneath the ocean shelf upwards, wedging the Indian oceanic plate beneath the front edge of Sumatra," he said.

"This caused enormous pressure which, when released, made the front edge of Sumatra leap upwards by several metres."

"It generates the energy of tens of Hiroshimas, making the earth ring like a bell and squashing it like a football."

Booth added: "I'm very surprised there was no tsunami yesterday. The people of Asia are extremely fortunate the quake movement appears to have been downwards."

## Lanka calls for single authority to coordinate emergency broadcasts

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan legislators called yesterday for a single body to issue warnings on potential natural disasters after broadcasters complained of a lack of information about Monday's tsunami alert.

The lawmakers held the previously scheduled hearing a day after a huge earthquake off Indonesia triggered tsunami alerts and evacuations in several Indian Ocean countries including Sri Lanka.

Thousands of people were urged to evacuate coastal areas in broadcasts late Monday but some media outlets said access to information was haphazard.

The head of the state-run Independent Television Network, Newton Gunaratne, told the lawmakers that after broadcasting warnings for coastal residents to move to higher ground they were unable later on to get information on the status of the possible tsunami.

## No tsunami but 3-metre waves surge ashore

AFP, Banda Aceh

Waves of up to three metres (10-feet) surged into Indonesian coastlines in the wake of a major earthquake, witnesses said yesterday, but damage from the waters appears to have been small despite widespread tsunami panic.

An 8.7 magnitude earthquake struck southwest of Sumatra late Monday, triggering tsunami alerts around the Indian Ocean amid fears of a repeat of the December 26 disaster that killed 270,000 people.

Alerts were dropped within of hours as it emerged that the new quake, though close in location and scale to the earlier seismic event, would not result in the same widespread destruction despite at least 300 dead on the island of Nias.

But according to officials and witnesses, some stretches of coast-

line experienced ocean surges, ranging from three-metre walls of water to waves racing kilometres inland.

Endang Suwaraya, a military commander in the western Indonesian province of Aceh, close to the epicentre of the quake, said he had received reports that large waves had ploughed into the main port on Simeulue island.

"I have obtained the information that in Simeulue there were tsunami waves of between two and three meters, damaging the wharf," he said.

He said several buildings collapsed, including the main hospital in the coastal town of Sinabang, where the island's airport was also affected.

"In Sinabang, a lot of buildings collapsed I do not know their precise number," he said, adding that the town's

hospital suffered major damage.

He said there were also reports of a "tsunami" in the nearby Banyak islands, while waters surging inland on the coast of Aceh province on mainland Sumatra island caused the collapse of several bridges.

On Nias, a woman who identified herself as Ping Ping, described how the sea rose more than it had after last year's tsunami, which left Nias relatively unscathed but wreaked destruction elsewhere.

"The water level rose higher than last December, reaching in up to 30 meters," she said.

According to the state Antara news agency, the entire town of Aceh Singkil was levelled by the earthquake, although 10,000 were able to flee their homes.

## 'India buoyed by US arms sale offer'

AFP, New Delhi

Publicly disappointed by the impending US sale of F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan, India is privately buoyed by Washington's offer to improve military cooperation and help it become a "major world power", analysts say.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been circumspect in his reaction to Washington's offer to discuss defence transformation with India and assist it "become a major world power in the 21st century".

"As far as India is concerned, there is an offer. But the terms and conditions, we do not know. It is premature for me to say. We will discuss with (Washington)," Singh said late Monday.

Analysts, however, said Washington's statement marked a historical shift in its relations with India and that its significance is not lost on the leadership in New Delhi.

"Even India, with a long tradition of making foreign policy self-goals,

will find it hard to say 'no' to the extraordinary offer the Bush administration has put on the table - a promise to assist it in becoming a world power in return for resumption of arms sales to Pakistan," political commentator C. Raja Mohan said.

"As India finds itself at a critical moment in its recent effort to transform its security situation and alter its global standing, it will be compelled to take a long hard look at the US proposals," Mohan wrote in an article for the Indian Express newspaper.

The US proposal came even as it announced plans to beef up the military of New Delhi's nuclear rival, Pakistan, by selling it an undetermined number of sophisticated F-16 combat planes.

In his official reaction to the sale of jets to Islamabad, Singh expressed "great disappointment", saying the decision could have "negative consequences for India's security environment".

## India turns down Taslima's plea for citizenship

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government turned down self-exiled Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen's plea for citizenship but has granted her a six-month multiple entry visa, a home ministry official said Tuesday in New Delhi.

On February 17, Nasreen wrote to Home Minister Shivraj Patil urging India to grant her citizenship, saying the country of her birth had "slammed the doors" on her possible return.

The doctor-turned-writer fled Bangladesh after the publication of her book "Lajjya" or "Shame" in 1994 that was critical of the treatment of women in the country and earned her the wrath of Islamic fundamentalists.

In 2002, she was given a one-year prison term in absentia on charges of making derogatory comments about Islam in several of her books.

## Army, militants clash in Yemen: 33 killed

AFP, Sanaa

Yemeni security forces and supporters of a slain rebel preacher were again involved in deadly clashes Tuesday in a resurgence of violence that has claimed 33 lives in the space of 24 hours.

As troops sealed off villages in the rebel Saada province near the border with Saudi Arabia, clashes for the first time extended southward to the region of Amran where fighters ambushed an army convoy, killing three soldiers.

Army soldiers cordoned off villages in Saada province on the lookout for followers of radical rebel Zaidi preacher Sheikh Hussein Badr Eddin al-Huthi, who was killed by

Yemeni armed forces in September last year.

A total of 23 rebels and 10 members of the army and security forces have been killed since the violence erupted early Monday, in the most serious confrontations since Huthi was declared dead, tribal sources told AFP.

They also said 51 rebel fighters were detained by the authorities.

There was no official confirmation of the casualties or the arrests. The official news agency SABA reported late Monday that the army clashes with "subversive elements affiliated" to Huthi's movement killed at least 15 people, including seven members of the army and security forces.

## Disasters hit Asia-Pacific region hard : UN report

AFP, Seoul

The Asia-Pacific region has accounted for four out of every five global victims of natural disasters for the past century and remains highly vulnerable, a UN report said yesterday.

The release of the report at a conference of regional environment ministers came hours after a major earthquake rocked Indonesia, leaving hundreds and possibly thousands dead.

The region is still struggling to recover from the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26 which the report said cost 295,000 lives.

"The number of deaths caused

(by) natural disasters in the region accounted for about 85 percent of that of the world during the last century," said the report by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (Escap).

Since 1900 floods, cyclones, earthquakes, droughts, storms, tsunamis and haze were the most common natural disasters experienced in the Asia-Pacific, it said.

Australia, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines and Vietnam were most frequently hit by natural disasters.

From 1990-2003, natural disasters cost the Asia-Pacific region

some 380 billion dollars in economic losses, mostly from cyclones, floods and earthquakes, Escap said in a separate survey.

During the same period an estimated 6.8 million people died in the region as a result of such disasters, including 295,000 killed in the Indian Ocean tsunami late last year.

"These losses have much more severe socio-economic impacts on those developing and least-developed countries," said Kim Hak-Su, UN under secretary general and executive secretary of Escap.

## Afghan dam burst wipes out hundreds of houses

AFP, Kabul

A dam ruptured in southern Afghanistan early yesterday, unleashing floods which killed at least six people and washed away hundreds of houses and shops, the provincial governor said.

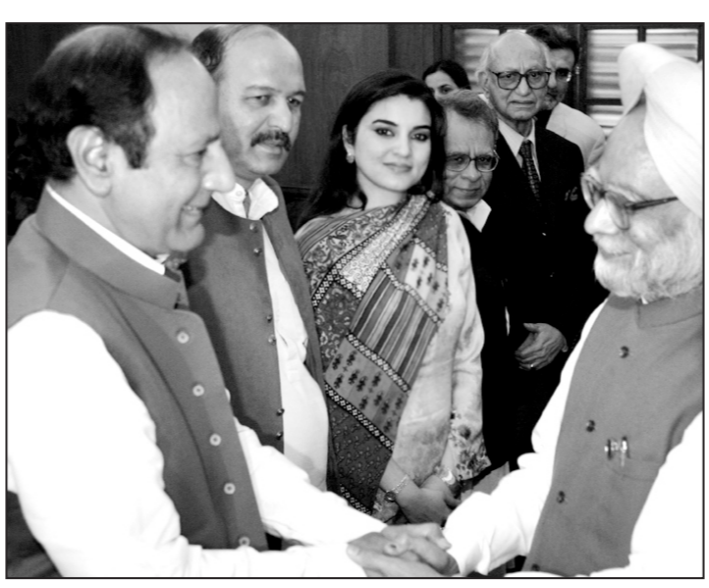
The US military sent Black Hawk helicopters to help with rescue operations after the Bandi Sultan dam burst and swamped Ghazni city, 150km south of Kabul, and the surrounding area.

"We have reports of at least six people who have died in floods," Ghazni province governor

Asadullah Khalid told AFP, adding that it was impossible to confirm exact casualties because roads to the affected region were flooded.

"The damage due to the flood is huge. Hundreds of shops have been destroyed in the city of Ghazni, thousands of hectares of agricultural land has been washed away and hundreds of livestock have died," he added.

Aid workers were installing a camp to house 100 families displaced by the rising waters, Mohammed Ghaus Awlia, head of the Afghan Red Crescent Society told AFP.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) shakes hands with former Pakistani prime minister and Pakistan Muslim League (PML) President Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain prior to a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Hussain is on a three-day visit to India during which he will meet with political and business leaders.