

The Great Indian Ocean Tsunami

The tsunami came ashore as a giant wall of water, 35 feet high and black with sand scooped from the ocean floor, destroying thousands of homes and shops, leaving hundreds of thousands dead or missing.

6:58 AM local time on the day after Christmas, December 26, 2004, the largest earthquake to hit the world in 40 years struck, 10 miles under the sea bed just off the western tip of Indonesia's Sumatra island.

The earthquake knocked down buildings but the real toll—273,000 people dead or missing—came when the quake set off undersea waves that sped across the Indian Ocean at 600 km per hour (375 mph), rising up in killer tsunamis or tidal waves.

The suffering and loss are beyond description. Thousands of children lost their parents. Parents lost children and spouses.

Yet amid the most devastating natural disaster to hit the world in decades, there were rays of hope. The world reacted with speed and compassion. U.S. warships sailed full speed to deliver aid—clean water, medicine, tents and food. Dozens of countries—led by a massive U.S. aid operation—focused on the displaced, the wounded.

Despite warnings that more would die from disease, lack of clean water or hunger than died in the tsunami—there were no outbreaks of illness. Hundreds of non-government organizations, the ministries of health and welfare, militaries of many nations banded together to assist those in need. Some \$6 billion in humanitarian aid was pledged by countries and private citizens. The United States gave the largest pledge of \$950 million, followed by Germany.

But for hundreds of thousands, it was too late. The disaster came swiftly—in a few devastating minutes—without warning.

In Banda Aceh, just a hundred miles or so from the epicenter of the magnitude 9 undersea earthquake, a huge department store tumbled into a jagged pile of ruins.

Government buildings pancaked. Walls cracked and windows broke. But it was nothing compared to what followed.

As the earthquake pushed a piece of the ocean floor the length of California upwards several feet, the sudden movement unleashed waves of energy that sped through the ocean at 500 miles per hour—the Japanese called them tsunamis and in English they're known as tidal waves.

IN MINUTES, they hit their first obstacle—the west coast of Sumatra in Aceh province, a rural, rice-growing region ridged with towering, jungle-clad peaks and inhabited by 4 million mainly Muslim people.

At Calang and Meluaboh and dozens of smaller towns and villages, barely awake people were swept to their deaths by a wave that towered 60 to 80 feet tall, driving inland up to three kilometers. It would be days before any survivors could be reached by rescuers to tell the tale of horror. But the tens of thou-

sands killed on Sumatra's sparsely populated south west tip were only a prelude.

The medium-sized city of Banda Aceh lay stunned that morning after the quake, unaware of the violent surge of water rushing towards it under the ocean. Boats at sea would scarcely notice the tsunami which raised the sea only about 25 centimeters (10 inches) in deep water, moving at hundreds of miles per hour as a wave of energy.

As it bore down on the sleepy city of 300,000 people, and reached the shallow water near its harbor and densely packed downtown, the lower edge of the tsunami slowed as it rubbed along the ocean floor. The upper edge rose up, sucking the ocean back from the shore leaving the ocean floor exposed with thousands of stranded fish flopping on the mud. Unaware that this is the sign of an impending tsunami, people watched or ran to catch the fish.

Then the ocean returned, rushing forward at perhaps 50 miles per hour as a towering black wall of water mixed with mud from the ocean floor.

"FIFTEEN MINUTES AFTER the earthquake I saw the water coming and I ran," said Zainal Abidin, 49, who sold fish in the port.

"The water was 12 meters high (36 feet). I ran with the water a few meters behind me and jumped into a dump truck to escape. People were being sucked into the water and asking for help. I heard the noise of the houses sucked under the water. Half a minute later I couldn't see them. The water was so strong it came out of the drains. There was no question of swimming."

Abidin's wife and two daughters aged 21 and 9 were killed—"we never found them,"



he said as he looked out over the flat cement platform that is all that remains of his home. "This is the grave of my family."

It is littered with smashed brick walls, twisted sheets of tin roofing and bits of colorful cloth caught on branches. There is a curtain, still on its rod, a yogurt cup, a child's pink school bag.

A neighbor rides up on a bicycle, sees Abidin and they embrace. Both are weeping.

Behind them, the trunk of a coconut tree shows the stain left by the sea water, about 20 feet above the ruined city floor.

Anyone who has tried to lift a couple of pails of water knows that water is heavy. When this wall of water, now moving about 80 km per hour (50 mph), hit the first ships and port structures, it hurled them off their moorings and foundations, smashing them against each other and tearing them to bits.

The tidal wave moved inland, somehow sparing hundreds of palm trees as the water passed around the thin trunks, ripping off every frond. It smashed thousands of houses into rubble, turning furniture, brick walls and wooden siding into dangerous weapons. Thousands of people never had a chance. Engulfed suddenly in the wall of water, they were smashed by the debris or drowned, wrapped in junk and clutter that was once their homes.

A 200-foot long barge with a huge electric generator was carried inland five kilometers by the 30 foot wall of water, settling on top of the remains of houses. From that boat back to the sea one walks along a scene of Biblical destruction, littered with the hopes

PHOTOGRAPHING HISTORY: An Indonesian visitor takes a photo of the devastated center of Banda Aceh, Indonesia, where 200,000 people died or were lost to the tsunami December 26. The sea lies just beyond the most distant trees.

and dreams and bodies of the ancient city of Banda Aceh.

Perhaps 200,000 people died there in a few minutes before the water, its energy exhausted, flowed back into the Indian Ocean, carrying with it tons of debris and thousands of bodies that have never been found.

One month after the tsunami, Indonesian troops and relief workers were finding 1,000 bodies per day as mechanical excavators removed the shattered piles of debris and found the dead beneath.

At least, the smell of death had gone. But the fear remained as survivors mourned their lost children and parents and recalled the moments of terror as they fought to survive.

LESS THAN AN HOUR LATER At sea, the wave bore on, hitting next the resort towns of Thailand's Andaman Sea coastline—Phuket Island and the nearby beach resort of Khao Lak. About half the 5,000 dead and 2,000 still missing in Thailand were foreign tourists.

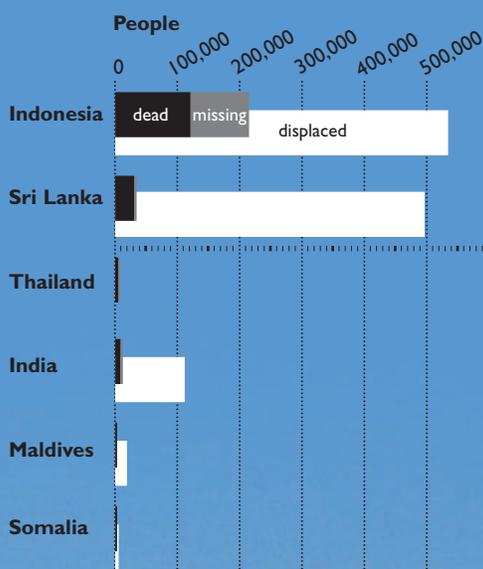
TWO HOURS AFTER the earthquake, Sri Lanka was next—3 meter (15 foot) waves lashed the coastline, killing 30,000 people and leaving another 10,000 missing. It was called the worst natural disaster in the island nation's history.

Once again, children and fishing folk living near the sea wondered as the sea withdrew 400 meters (400 yards) from the shore, exposing the sea bed and flopping fish. Some raced down to look or collect the fish, only to be washed away as the sea returned.

Abdul Kafoor, 36, is a fisherman in the east coast town of Kalmunaikudy in Ampara Province where more than 100,000 people have lost their homes.

"I lost my wife and three children in the waves," said the fisherman. "Of 16,000 people in our town, 2,500 died. I survived be-

Tsunami's Toll Across Asia



Source: United Nations and governments of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Maldives

cause I went to the road to get tea. I ran to save my children but couldn't."

His two surviving children Farmil, 9 and Fazna, 8 cling to his sarong as he asks a visitor, now that his wife is dead, "How can I work and bring up two children?"

Relentlessly, the tsunamis continued their terrible route across the Indian Ocean, killing 10,000 on India's southeastern Tamil Nadu Province coastline, scores in Burma and Malaysia, hundreds in the Maldives, and reaching thousands of miles across the sea to Somalia on Africa's coast to kill 200 more.

This report tells the story of the tsunamis and how people have worked together to help the survivors rebuild their health, homes and families in the wake of this greatest natural disaster in their lifetimes.

