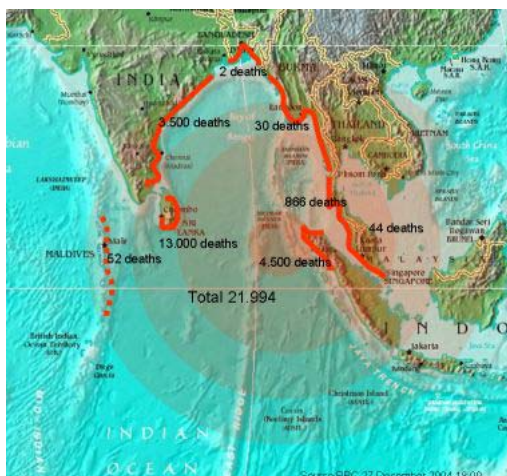


Emergency Alert



WHO



Health Action in Crises **SOUTHEAST ASIA EARTHQUAKE AND TSUNAMI**

Situation

27 December 2004 - A series of earthquakes with epicentres off the Northern Sumatra (Aceh) and resultant tsunamis have hit Southeast Asia and caused serious damage and loss of life.

The first, strongest quake on 26 December, at 0058 hours GMT, had the magnitude of 8.9 on the Richter Scale, followed by a second severe quake (0421 GMT). Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Maldives, India and Thailand have been affected as well as Malaysia, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Considerable numbers of deaths have already been reported, and figures can be expected to rise in the coming days. The tsunamis have caused large scale damage to infrastructures, including health facilities.

According to the latest information received, the scale and magnitude of the tsunamis seem to have been much less destructive in Malaysia, Bangladesh and Myanmar than in other countries, particularly in Sri Lanka, where the greatest level of needs seems to now concentrate.

Possible needs in the health sector and WHO's actions

At this stage, it is vital to assess the health situation as precisely as possible, and reach all the affected areas. WHO gives priority to **rapid health assessment** by supporting the efforts of national and local counterparts.

- In *Sri Lanka*, a senior WHO official is on the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) evaluation team due to arrive in the country today
- In *Indonesia*, WHO is joining the Ministry of Health in a rapid assessment of the situation in Northern Sumatra to leave tomorrow while a Joint UN Mission will be deployed later in the week
- In *Thailand* and *Myanmar* the respective WHO Representatives are working closely with the Ministry of Health to assess affected areas in these countries.
- In *India* WHO is in touch with the local government officials and the local UNICEF offices for regular updates of the situation. The Office of the WHO Representative is monitoring the situation with regard to the status of relief measures/operations, health system status and population displacement / relief camps

Current figures concerning injured people indicate that hospitals will have to **manage mass casualties** with appropriate surgical and medical care. While national counterparts can provide the necessary human resources and systems, international partners will have to ensure the provision of necessary supplies.

- WHO is preparing to supply at least 15 New Emergency Health Kits (each kit is designed to cover the basic health needs of 10,000 persons for three months) and 13 trauma kits (each covering 100 interventions) to the countries in the Region.
- WHO is sending four New Emergency Health Kits (NEHK) tomorrow (28 December) to *Colombo, Sri Lanka*, with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In Sri Lanka alone, there are already 250 temporary camps hosting people made homeless by the tsunami. Conditions such as overcrowding and inadequate shelter provide favorable conditions for **acute respiratory infections**, which can represent a major cause of death, especially for children, if left untreated.

South East Asia is endemic for **malaria and dengue fever**. Flooding and stagnant water create favorable conditions for the mosquito vector. Overcrowding facilitates mosquito bites and therefore transmission.

- WHO is setting in place a strict monitoring of the epidemiological situation through the roll back malaria regional program and the regional DengueNet

Poor quality and quantity of water and insufficient sanitation, overcrowding and poor hygiene in temporary camps will bring forward the risk for **outbreaks of different diarrhoeal diseases**. Thorough and sustained water purification is an absolute priority.

- WHO is providing chlorine and water purification tablets to partners
- In order to be prepared against possible outbreaks WHO is mobilizing at least 15 diarrhoeal kits (each kit is designed to treat 100 SEVERE cases of diarrhea and/or cholera)

Apart from biological **pollution**, the possibility that the environment be polluted by leaks or overflows from flooded chemical factories and warehouses must also be taken into consideration. Water can be contaminated by gasoline and oil leaking from damaged vehicles.

- WHO programs for water and sanitation and for international chemical safety have been alerted

Dead bodies **do not** pose any health threat, but they feed fears and can divert precious attention and resources from effective relief efforts. Technical guidance and rational decisions based on sound scientific evidence are another priority need for the health of all the affected and surrounding populations. WHO is working on strengthening **health coordination and evidence-based decision making** in all affected countries in the region.

Coordinating joint action for health is critical. To this end WHO is:

- strengthening the capacity of its South East Asia Regional Office (SEARO) to ensure harmonization of regional relief operation
- collaborating with UNDAC and other UN bodies
- working closely with national authorities

Resources

Financial support has been received from the Government of Italy and funding for immediate action has been provided by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) . Given the magnitude of the disaster, needs are anticipated to be large, and WHO will revert shortly on the requirements.

For situation updates:

*Rob Holden, Office of the Representative of the Director-General for Health Action in Crises, holdenr@who.int
Mobile: (41 79) 475 5558, Tel: 41 22 791 2510*

Dr David Nabarro, Representative of the Director-General for Health Action in Crises, nabarrod@who.int

For resource mobilization:

*Marianne Muller, External Relations, Health Action in Crises, mullerm@who.int
Tel: 41 22 791 1887*