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Indonesian tsunami shows more work needed to prepare vulnerable populations

**The tragic losses caused by the 25 October earthquake and tsunami off Sumatra show that efforts must be intensified to further improve the preparedness of coastal populations in the world’s most vulnerable regions, said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova.**

The Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System functioned effectively during the magnitude 7.7 earthquake and tsunami. However, warning messages could not be issued quickly enough to protect populations within minutes of the epicenter, near the Indonesian Mentawai Islands.

“We must intensify our efforts to make sure communities on shorelines close to tsunami source zones know what to do when a strong earthquake is felt,” said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova. “Immediate self-evacuation is the key to survival for near-field tsunamis. People must know to head for high ground as quickly as possible.”

Wendy Watson-Wright, UNESCO Assistant Director-General and Executive Secretary of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC), confirmed that the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System issued timely tsunami alert messages on this event. The national system for Indonesia, the Indonesian Tsunami Early Warning System (InaTEWS) issued the first warning to national authorities within five minutes of the sub-sea earthquake, which allowed many communities to take the necessary precautions.

However, as the centre of the earthquake and tsunami was located just a few kilometers off the Indonesian islands of Mentawai, even the very swift warning from Indonesian authorities could not reach the fishing villages on Pagai or Sipora before the tsunami hit the shore.

“Since 2004, a vast amount of work has been done to establish an effective warning system for the Indian Ocean. We have state-of-the-art equipment in the water that allows us to know very quickly if a tsunami has been generated, and a

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range of alert mechanisms have been put into place in coastal areas make sure official warnings reach local populations. But we still have a great deal of awareness raising and public information work ahead to make sure we go the last mile and reach the most vulnerable communities,” said Watson-Wright.

UNESCO-IOC established the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System following the 2004 earthquake and tsunami off the shores of Indonesia that took the lives of over 200,000 people. Warnings for the system are presently issued by the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre based in Hawaii and the Japanese North-West Pacific Tsunami Advisory Centre based in Tokyo.

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