Asian Tsunami Disaster
Rapid Environmental Assessment Report

(photo: OCHA/UNDAC 2005)

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Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit

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A. Overview

On 26 December 2004, between 00:58 GMT and 7:38 GMT, a series of earthquakes occurred in the area of the west coast of northern Sumatra. The strongest earthquake had the magnitude of 8.9 on the Richter scale and was followed by aftershocks ranging from 6 to 7.3.

The earthquakes triggered powerful tsunamis reaching ten meters in height, and these moved through neighbouring parts of the Indian Ocean at over 500 kilometres an hour wrecking coastal areas in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Maldives, as well as in Myanmar, Seychelles, and Somalia.

To date, an estimated 139,000 people lost their lives and some 18,000 still are missing. *How many displaced persons, to add here?*

The tsunamis flooded coastal areas and wiped away homes and buildings, roads and bridges, water and electricity supplies, crops, irrigation and fishery infrastructure, food and fuel network.

In the aftermath of the disaster, United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) Teams have been deployed in Sri Lanka, Maldives, Indonesia, Thailand and Seychelles to carry out rapid assessment of priority needs and to support national authorities and the United Nations Resident Coordinator to coordinate international relief on-site.

The Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit was part of the UNDAC Teams in Sri Lanka and in the Maldives and carried out a rapid environmental assessment of the situation. In Indonesia, Thailand and the Seychelles, the Joint Unit has sent environmental experts to conduct a rapid environmental assessment in full collaboration with the UNDAC Teams and United Nations Country Teams (UNCT) in situ.

The rapid environmental assessment conducted by the Joint Unit in all affected countries consisted of identifying acute environmental issues with immediate relevance to human welfare and response efforts.

B. Context

Background

Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit

The Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit is the integrated United Nations emergency response mechanism to activate and provide international assistance to countries facing environmental emergencies and natural disasters with significant environmental impacts.

The Joint Unit mobilizes and coordinates assistance, upon governmental request, to developing countries when domestic capacity is exceeded or additional response resources and specialized expertise are required.

In 2003, the Joint Unit, in collaboration with CARE and the Benfield Hazard Research Centre, has developed Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment in Disasters (REA) Guidelines, which constitutes a methodology for rapid assessment of environmental impacts of disasters whether natural, human-induced, industrial or conflict disaster. The Guidelines have been field –tested and have proven to be an effective tool in identifying priority environmental concerns during crises.

C. Environmental Assessment Activities and Findings

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E. Recommendations

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Endnotes