

India evacuates 30,000 in tsunami drill



Indian schoolchildren preparing for today's tsunami drill in Odisha.

By Sarah Wade-Apicella

PATISUNAPUR, ODISHA 7 September - Today not only marked the start of the two-day IOWave16 tsunami drill for 24 countries in the Indian Ocean, but also demonstrated the true power of people to take charge of their own safety and reduce loss of life against the most deadly of all natural hazards, a tsunami.

Nowhere was that more evident today than across 328 coastal villages in the Indian state of Odisha on the Bay of Bengal, a fatal shore for centuries past. Some 30,000 people were evacuated there today as part of a major awareness raising exercise in a year which will see the inauguration of the first-ever World Tsunami Awareness Day on November 5.

While a tsunami cannot be prevented, its impact can be greatly mitigated through regular community-wide preparedness including training and drills, timely warnings, effective response, public awareness and education.

Today's drill simulated a magnitude 9.2 Southern Sumatra earthquake – an earthquake that in Odisha, India, would be too far away to be felt immediately but could lead to great loss of life if tsunami alerts were not issued and warnings were not acted on. Today's first message was sent from the warning centre to state authorities at 08:30 Indian Standard Time.

When Odisha was hit by Super Cyclone Paradip in 1999, 10,000 lives were lost and painful memories remain. In December 2004, India was among the hardest hit countries when the Indian Ocean Tsunami claimed 230,000 lives and brought the word tsunami to global public awareness.

Since then, the Government of India has established the Indian Tsunami Early Warning System and the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of UNESCO began tsunami drills in 2009. By the time Super Cyclone Phailin hit Odisha in 2013, the state of awareness and preparedness was such that few lives were lost.

India pursues a de facto "zero casualty" policy through a system-wide approach to preparedness planning: the Indian Tsunami Early Warning Centre (ITEWC) hosted at the Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS) in Hyderabad has a dissemination plan that reaches out to a nationwide network of disaster response and emergency operations centres, district centres, the general public and the media.

"After 1999, the state level began instituting tsunami preparedness and gradually all people began to learn what could be done not to repeat the past", said Mr L.K. Sethi, Subcollector of the Brahmapur Subdivision of the Ganjam district of Odisha, and one of the local authorities responsible for community training.

He continued: "Training has focused on developing community task force groups for search and rescue, first aid, relief and supplies, as well as rehabilitation groups, and those focused on



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identifying and assisting groups in communities to ensure prompt evacuation with priority to kids and lactating mothers, older persons and pregnant women, and the physically challenged.

"Village volunteers lead task forces, each represented by women and men, boys and girls, with the know-how and training to lead the evacuation. And the multi-purpose cyclone shelter belongs to the community – it is theirs to manage." The shelter is also a small source of income. Fees are paid for its use during community functions.

By 8:43, a second message issuing a warning was received. A yellow flag and bell called the village volunteer group to be on the alert and they met to agree on tasks should the warning be confirmed. By 9:20, local authorities had received warning confirmation of tsunami observation; the red flag was flown, the bell and siren sounded, and the evacuation began.

Here in the shelter in Patisunaput village where 1,500 people have been evacuated, there are rooms for women, for men, and for children where lessons can continue. Livestock are also led to shelter, and village task forces check to ensure that no one, and no critical possession, has been left behind. Village level standard operating procedures are well known and followed. Following evacuation and once assembled, first aid demonstrations take place including how to assist persons living with disability.

"This exercise just validates the whole Indian Tsunami Early Warning System – from INCOIS, right through to the Odisha state, down to the village", said Ms. Christa von Hillebrandt-Andrade, Manager of the US National Weather Service Caribbean Tsunami Warning Program and Chair of UNESCO's IOC CARIBE Early Warning System.

Attending as an international observer, she said: "The power and force that this community has is impressive. The power that they have is the cyclone shelter that they can go to, and the force is their community empowerment."

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction calls for all-of-society engagement to reduce disaster risk, putting people at its centre. The people responsible for today's successful drill in the village of Patisunapur, Odisha not only demonstrate a strong people-centred approach, but also national and regional cooperation. It's an impressive demonstration of Sendai Framework Priority 2: Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk.

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United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction - Regional Office for Asia and Pacific (UNISDR AP)

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