

Alert condition stimulated in simulated tsunami crisis

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Residents of a coastal hamlet alerted to move to safe places on Tuesday. Photo: T.Singaravelou

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Police personnel assist the officials in the evacuation. Photo: T.Singaravelou

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Annual mock drill held in coastal villages

At 5.30 am on Tuesday, the Puducherry Revenue and Disaster Management Department receives a tsunami alert from the Indian Tsunami Early Warning Centre and The Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services , Hyderabad.

The terse communication states that an earthquake of magnitude 9.1 has occurred at a depth of 10 km in the sea off the south of Java, Indonesia. Earthquakes of this size sometimes have the potential to set off a general tsunami. However, so far there has been no confirmation about a tsunami being triggered. An investigation is under way to determine if a tsunami has indeed been set off. The advisory says this is only a haul-up message to the national/ State/local authorities and disaster management offices. It also advises the authorities to decide upon any action to be taken in response.

On receiving the alert, Puducherry Collector S. Sundaravadivelu immediately mobilises the officials of several

departments. Within minutes, the district administration is galvanised into action to execute the top priority — relocate people living in the coastal areas.

It was in this simulated tsunami situation that the 'Indian Ocean Tsunami Drill IO- Wave 14' operation began on Tuesday in the coastal hamlet of M. Pudhukuppam near Puducherry.

Officials and staff of the Revenue, Police, Fisheries, Health, Public Works Departments and private medical colleges were involved in the operation, which was held under the close watch of a team from the National Disaster Response Force, Arakkonam.

Deputy Collector S. Rajamanickam told *The Hindu*, "This is an annual mock drill held in the coastal villages to test the readiness of the district administration to an emergency and gauge its ability to take remedial steps. The drill will improve the organisational decision-making process."

The people living in the villages were alerted though a public announcement system mounted on jeep. The officials advised the residents to move at least 500 metres away from the shoreline and take refuge in a safer area.

For a few minutes, villagers ran helter-skelter before they collected their wards and got into the vehicles kept on standby for the evacuation drill.

In the collective operation, around 1,000 fishermen and their families were evacuated and taken to a safe place in Murthikuppam within half-an-hour. The police also assisted the authorities in the evacuation.

In the next round of the drill, the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) personnel swung into action to search for the people stranded in the village. The 'injured and sick' were given medical care by doctors at makeshift clinics.

Jagdish Harod, Inspector, NDRF, said, "Whenever there is distress, we have to respond. Our personnel are well-trained in search and rescue operations. We remove the persons trapped on roof-tops or caught in the flood."

The rescued villagers stayed at temporary shelters and were given food and medicines.

R. Anjana of M. Pudhukuppam said, "Had such drills been put in place before 2004, many of our near and dear ones would not have perished in the December 26 tsunami."

M. Pandian said, "We lost our belongings, nets, boats and relatives in 2004. This kind of a drill will definitely help us to be alert."

According to experts, the 2004 tsunami has created awareness of tsunami peril in the Indian Ocean Region. The tsunami that struck Japan on March 11, 2011 is also a stark reminder of the unpredictable danger posed by the killer waves. This puts a tremendous responsibility on countries such as India where 26 per cent of the population live along the shores.