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115,000 people evacuate in the Indian Ocean-wide tsunami exercise

REPORT from   UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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A record 115,000 people in the Indian Ocean region evacuated during the tsunami exercise Indian Ocean Wave 2018 (IOWave18) conducted on 4-5 September 2018. The exercise was coordinated by UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) as part of the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigations System (IOTWMS). Exercise IOWave18 involved enacting two scenarios – a magnitude 9.0 earthquake off the southern coast of the Islamic Republic of Iran and a magnitude 9.3 earthquake off the western coast of Northern Sumatra on the 4th and 5th September respectively. In addition to testing standard operating procedures and communication links at all levels of the tsunami warning chain, a primary objective of IOWave18 was to enhance tsunami preparedness at community level including evacuation procedures. To this end, all Member States[1] were encouraged to use Exercise IOWave 18 as an opportunity to evaluate Indian Ocean Tsunami Ready (IOTR)[2] indicators in pilot communities, following the IOTR guidelines.

During the exercise, Tsunami Service Providers (TSPs) of Australia, India and Indonesia issued mock tsunami bulletins to the National Tsunami Warning Centres / Tsunami Warning Focal Points of all participating countries. All twenty-four active IOTWMS countries are reported to have participated in IOWave18, out of which at least 10 countries conducted community evacuations. The evacuations involved residents, tourists, schoolchildren, fishing communities, beach goers, marinas and hotels.

The countries that have reported undertaking evacuations and estimated number of people evacuated include India (100,000), Sri Lanka (7,000), Oman (3,225), Indonesia (2,941), Mauritius (553), Tanzania (300), Thailand (300), Kenya (200), Iran (150) and Pakistan (55). Most importantly, at least 6 communities (Jayadevkasaba Pahi, Podhuan, Tantiapal Sasan, Noliasahi, Keutajanga and Venkatraipur) in Odisha province of India and 1 community (AlSawadi AlSahil) in Oman are reported to have evaluated their community preparedness against IOTR indicators, with an intent of achieving Tsunami Ready recognition in the near future.

A public webpage developed by TSP-Australia to display the summary of national tsunami warnings issued by countries in the Indian Ocean was launched during the exercise. The webpage is available at www.bom.gov.au/tsunami/iotwms and marks an important enhancement to the provision of public tsunami information.

There has been substantial engagement of national and international media during IOWave18. The website www.iowave.org and Twitter handle #iowave18 set up by the Indian Ocean Tsunami Information Centre (IOTIC) were actively used for enhancing public awareness. There is additional scope to enhance media participation in future exercises.

In addition to national observers deployed in several countries, experts from Asian and Pacific Centre for the Development of Disaster Information Management (APDIM) of the UNESCAP and the Global Disaster Resilience Centre of the University of Huddersfield participated as International Observers in Iran and Sri Lanka respectively. An online survey tool is being used to obtain detailed feedback from participating countries, which will be followed by a post-IOWave18 lessons learnt workshop scheduled to be held in Jakarta, Indonesia during

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November 2018. Inputs obtained from all these sources will be analyzed by the IOWave18 Task Team for identifying gaps and recommending improvements to the end-to-end warning system that will be presented to the 12th ICG Session scheduled in Kish Island, I.R. of Iran during 3-6 March 2019.

IOWave18 is the 5th Indian Ocean wide exercise held by UNESCO-IOC with previous exercises held in 2009, 2011, 2014 and 2016. At its 11th session (Putrajaya, Malaysia, April 2017), the Intergovernmental Coordination Group for the IOTWMS decided to organise IOWave18 and established a Task Team with experts from Australia, India, Indonesia, Oman and Timor Leste to plan and conduct the exercise.

Indian Ocean nations called for the establishment of an Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System in the wake of the 2004 tsunami disaster. The new System became operational in 2011 with the support of UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC), which continues to coordinate the system's governance.

UNESCO promotes scientific exchange and collaborative efforts in order to establish effective early warning systems for different hazards such as landslides, volcanoes, earthquakes, floods, droughts and tsunamis. UNESCO's IOC assists countries to improve standard tsunami operating procedures through stakeholder workshops, development and evaluation of ocean-wide exercises, as well as overall scientific coordination across regions.

[1] Australia, Bangladesh, Comoros, France (Reunion Island and Mayotte), India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, Timor Leste and Yemen.

[2] IOTR, modelled on the lines of the CARIBE-EWS Tsunami Ready initiative, is a community performance-based programme that facilitates a structural and systematic approach in building community tsunami preparedness through an active collaboration of the public (community), community leaders, and local and national emergency management agencies.

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