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You are here: [Home](#) » [First Edit](#) » Testing time

Testing time

"The warning system needs to get better."

Two major earthquakes off the coast of Indonesia's Aceh province have mercifully left behind little damage or destruction. For several tense hours, 28 countries ringing the Indian Ocean were gripped in panic, as they waited for a tsunami to slam into their shores. Memories of the giant tsunami that caused the death of over 250,000 people on December 26, 2004 were no doubt fuelling their fears. Thankfully, the tsunami never came. The world could heave a sigh of relief. Wednesday's giant quakes provided Indian Ocean littorals with an opportunity to test in real time the efficacy of systems they put in place to alert us to tsunamis, raise an alert and spread information among the public and evacuate quickly. Feedback from events as they unfolded on Wednesday indicates that the system works. As sirens went off along the Aceh coast, people ran inland and to higher ground. The many drills they have participated in since 2004 guided their response.

How effective was India's tsunami warning system? It has been reported that the government issued a tsunami alert within minutes of the earthquake. That is good news. People were alerted by sirens, SMS and twitter. Authorities swung into action quickly to evacuate coastal areas and one must admit that they were far better prepared than in 2004. But that is not good enough. It appears that in parts of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where the threat of a tsunami was pretty high given its proximity to the quake's epicenter, the siren is located 3 km inland, which means fishermen did not hear it. Websites meant to provide information on the tsunami were inaccessible for several hours. The warning system needs to get much better and more focused on reaching the people.

That however cannot be said for public response to the alert. Television visuals of Marina Beach in Chennai showed young men and women crowding the road parallel to the beach waiting excitedly for the tsunami. No tsunami mechanism will work if the public refuses to co-operate. Billions of dollars have been spent to keep us safe. There is no point in wasting public money if people are going to ignore evacuation efforts. Public responses to tremors that were felt in cities like Bangalore and Kolkata indicate that awareness on how to react is low. Earthquakes cannot be predicted but we can improve our chances of surviving them by knowing how to respond. It underscores the need for quake drills across the country.

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