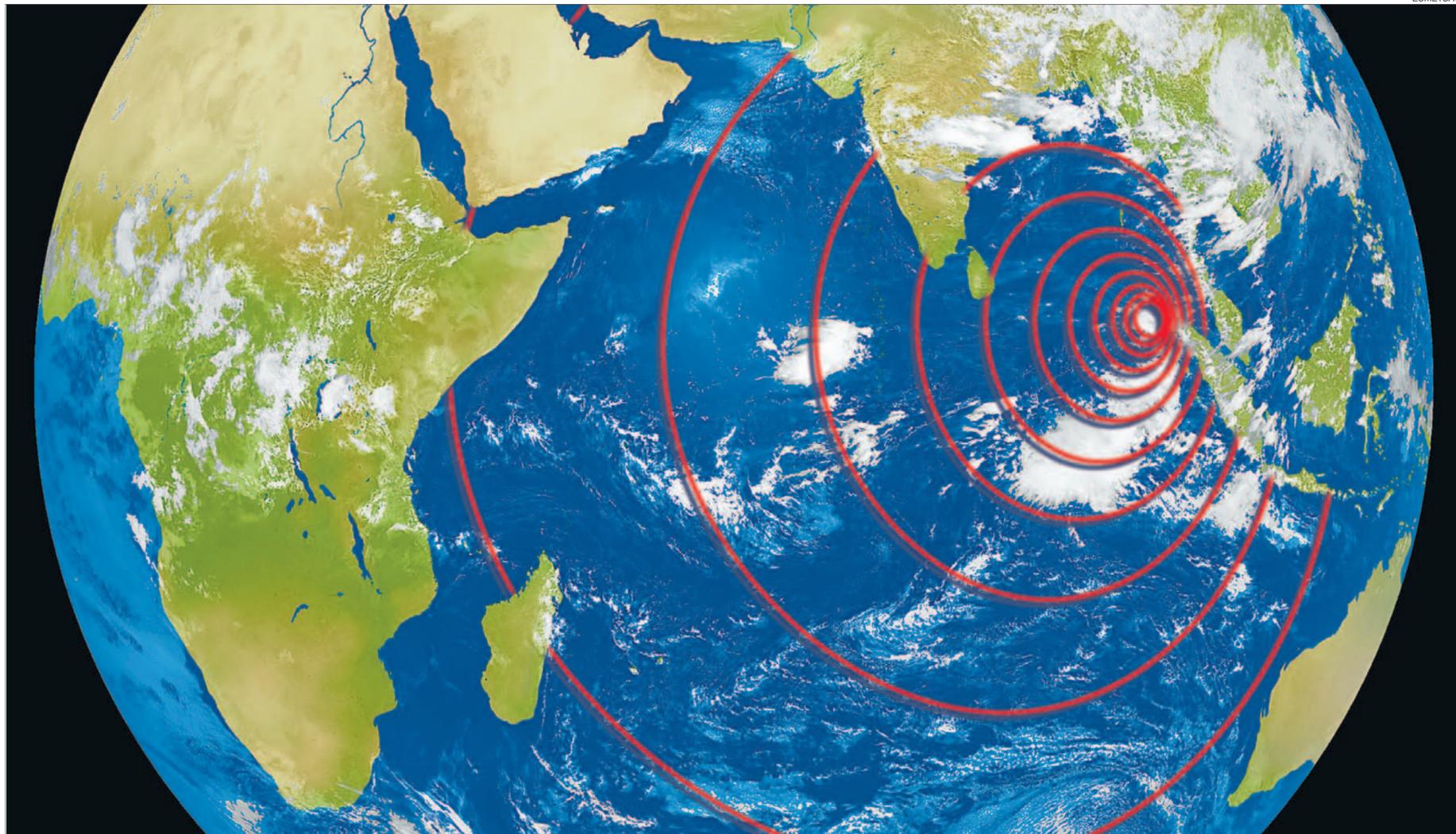


Wave of devastation

EUMETSAT



The undersea earthquake, measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale, had its epicentre west of Sumatra. The giant waves it created radiated out across the Indian Ocean, even, after more than eight hours, reaching the east coast of Africa, 3,700 miles away

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MORE THAN 12,000 people were swept to their deaths in southern Asia yesterday when a giant wall of water caused by the most powerful earthquake for 40 years devastated the region.

A series of tsunami up to 30ft high raced across the Indian Ocean and crashed into the coasts of Sri Lanka, southern India, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, carrying away people, houses, hotels, fishing boats and cars.

The waves, which can reach 500mph, even reached east Africa, smashing fishing boats and flooding low-lying areas 3,700 miles west of the epicentre of the earthquake, 60 miles off the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

Experts said the underwater tremor, which measured 9.0 on the Richter scale, may have had such a widespread impact because it occurred relatively close to the ocean surface.

The Association of British Travel Agents said that about 10,000 Britons were likely to be in the disaster area. At least one British tourist died – in the Maldives – and thousands were stranded. Last night the Foreign Office switchboard was jammed as people sought information about friends and relatives. The helpline – 0207 008 0000 – was described as busier than after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

The huge waves pitched boats into trees, washed away villages and resorts and carried off lorries and buses.

As an international relief operation began, officials braced themselves for mounting casualty figures.

Accurate counts were impossible but preliminary estimates put the number of dead at more than 4,500 in Sri Lanka,

Undersea earthquake is most powerful in 40 years

Tsunami leaves thousands dead, millions homeless

‘It was like somebody had pulled the plug on the ocean. It just disappeared. Then a large swell rushed back and swamped everything away’

Thailand Pages 2 & 3

4,400 in Indonesia, 3,000 in India, 400 in Thailand, 42 in Malaysia, 15 in Somalia and 32 in the Maldives. In Sri Lanka entire fishing villages, built from wood and palm fronds were erased from the map, leaving a million people homeless as they fled before the advancing waves.

Katie Razzall, 31, who was on honeymoon in Tangalla, a Sri Lankan resort, said: ‘‘It was terrifying. The water behind us was ripping through the trees as we ran up a hill to safety.’’

‘‘A few minutes later all the villagers

‘‘The three little girls on the beach never had a chance. The wall of water swept over them even before they had time to be scared’’

Sri Lanka Page 5

were out again, picking up the debris on the beach and trying to tidy up when another even bigger series of waves hit us. There were houses with lorries smashed into them and the harbour wall was pushed 150 yards up the coast.’’

Miss Razzall said that hundreds of bodies had been laid out in the hospitals for relatives to identify.

The affected area across the Indian Ocean and Andaman Sea includes many of the world’s most idyllic holiday destinations, including the Maldives and the

‘‘The weather was fine with no clouds, there was no warning and suddenly the sea water just hit the city. In some parts it was chest high’’

Indonesia Page 7

Thai diving centre of Phuket – a favourite with Britons at this time of year. In southern India more than 2,000 mostly poor fishermen and their families were killed, leaving the beaches littered with bodies as the waters receded.

The Pope led appeals for a swift international effort, with the European Commission giving more than £2million to meet ‘‘initial needs’’. The Queen sent a message of condolence.

Witnesses from India to Indonesia said the waves struck without warning.

‘‘It is no wonder earthquakes and floods feature so frequently in the Old Testament. They are, in the correct sense, awesome things’’

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Many described how the sea appeared suddenly to ‘‘seethe and boil’’ as it engulfed thousands of miles of coast. ‘‘It came out of nowhere,’’ said John Hyde, an Australian politician on holiday in Phuket. ‘‘Suddenly the streets were awash and people were screaming as they ran from the beach.’’

Many of the worst-affected areas, such as Sumatra, are in inaccessible and politically unstable regions.

In Sri Lanka at least 10 Britons were reported to have been admitted to hospi-

tal and an official Tamil website said that a Roman Catholic priest and 170 children at an orphanage had been killed. Soldiers were brought on to the streets of Galle, one of Sri Lanka’s most picturesque holiday destinations, after looters began plundering buildings.

In Aceh province, Sumatra, which has been racked by separatist violence for many years, there were reports of bodies wedged in trees and a hotel being washed away.

The tsunami destroyed a bridge in the town of Kawthaung, in southern Burma, close to the Thai border, killing 10 people. Several trawlers were missing at sea.

State television in the secretive, military-ruled country confirmed that the earthquake and several aftershocks had been felt but gave no details of damage or injuries.

Phuket, where three-wheel tuk-tuk taxis floated through the streets, was among the worst hit resorts in Thailand, with reports of divers and sunbathers being swept out to sea.

It is not known how many people were on the island when the waves struck, but David Fall, the British ambassador, said it could be thousands. British embassy teams were heading for the resort.

On Phi Phi island, Thailand, where hundreds of holiday bungalows were destroyed, the resort owner, Chan Marongtaechar, said he feared that many of his staff and scores of holidaymakers had drowned.

About 4,000 foreign and Thai tourists were stranded on Phi Phi, the tiny island that was made famous by the 2000 film *The Beach*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio.

Among the many scenes of suffering there were also dramatic stories of survival, as in Thailand where 80 divers were rescued from the renowned Emerald Cave. All had been assumed dead after being swept into the cave.



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