

How dismal England crashed to earth

Mike Selvey in the 28-page sport tabloid



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The readers' choice in G2

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# The Guardian

## Giant waves kill thousands after calls for warning system ignored

John Aglionby in Jakarta, Patrick Barkham and John Vidal

An early warning system that could have saved thousands of lives lost in the devastating tsunamis that swept around the rim of the Indian Ocean yesterday was talked about but not acted on by governments in the region, it was revealed last night.

More than 11,000 people were killed and millions more displaced in eight countries by a wall of water unleashed by the biggest earthquake for 40 years, which began 25 miles under the seabed off the Indonesian island of Sumatra, and measured 8.9 on the Richter scale.

Travelling at speeds of up to 300mph, the waves engulfed packed coastal resorts in Thailand, swamped fishing villages along the Indian coast, and smashed coastal resorts in Sri Lanka. Snorkellers were dragged across coral, sunbathers were swept off their beaches, divers trapped in caves, fishermen swept out to sea, and homes, hotels and cars across the Indian Ocean were swept away in a tide of debris-strewn water.

With thousands missing and communications destroyed in parts of Indonesia, governments warned that the death toll was certain to rise. Tremors from the quake, the fifth largest in 100 years, were measured in Britain and people were killed as far away as Bangladesh, Kenya and Somalia, 2,800 miles away, where at least nine people drowned in giant waves. Sri Lanka, more than 1,000 miles west of the epicentre of the earthquake, declared a national disaster after suffering the most fatalities. Beaches in Sri Lanka and the Indian state of Tamil Nadu were strewn with bodies. One Indian fisherman in Chennai said the area had been turned into a "cemetery".

The US Geological Survey last night said that most of the victims could have been saved if a tsunami warning system or tide gauges had been put in place like those which warn countries around the Pacific Ocean.

With the Bay of Bengal rarely hit by tsunamis, local people had flocked to the beach to watch the spectacular waves, only to be swept into the water. Other victims drowned after running to retrieve fish flung on to the beach by the first giant waves. "Most of those people could have been saved if they had had a tsunami warning system in place or tide gauges," said Waverly Person of the US Geological Survey.

Opposition parties in several countries attacked their governments for not warning people. In the Maldives, where elections are due to be held in the next week, the Maldivian Democratic party said: "The government was totally unprepared for the disaster, despite the fact that the country has faced many similar incidents in the past."

Governments around the Indian Ocean did not act on discussions last year about introducing an early warning system, according to Robert Bradnock of King's College London.

"Last year the governments in south-east Asia were discussing having an early warning system but because tsunamis are so rare there did not seem to be the energy behind it," Dr Bradnock said.

The main tremor struck at 7.58am local time (00.58GMT) after the Indian Ocean plate rubbed against the Eurasian plate, causing a bulge on the seabed 750 miles long. Nine smaller aftershocks followed.

A year to the day since the earthquake in the historic Iranian city of Bam, which measured 6.3 and killed more than 30,000 people, aid agencies again dispatched emergency relief. The United Nations sent disaster assessment teams to the region as the European Union announced an initial €3m (£2.1m) to help victims.

Just one British fatality was confirmed last night, but with more than 10,000 British tourists holidaying in south-east Asia, the death toll was certain to rise. A Briton died of a heart attack on the beach just as the tsunami struck the Maldives. Hundreds of British tourists spent last night huddled on high ground after their beach resorts were destroyed.



A tsunami victim is carried from the beach at Madras. Countries in the region had discussed an early warning system, it emerged yesterday Photograph: Reuters

'Suddenly we heard this loud rumbling'

Chris Francis, 30, from Sydney, who is on holiday in Phuket with his girlfriend, Karen Trippet, 27, also from Sydney, described what happened when the wave struck:

"We had just come down to Patong beach from our hotel to get some fresh air and clear our heads after heavy Christmas celebrations. The weather was perfect – clear skies with a slight breeze.

Suddenly we heard this loud rumbling in the distance. We looked up and saw a white-tipped wall of water bearing down on the beach. At first we just stayed where we were, as if transfixed, not quite sure what to make of it.

Then the shouting started and the screaming and the panicking. People who were in the sea rushed to get out, while those like us who were on the beach started moving away.

We kept looking back and could see people bobbing around in the water – unable to get out because the water had suddenly drained off the beach.

And then the first wave struck. It must have been a couple of metres high. It came crashing in, tossing boats up and throwing them around like a child's bath toys.

People were screaming for help but everyone was focusing on themselves. But we didn't move fast enough because the next wave struck a few minutes later. By now we were about 100 metres from the beach but we could hear and see the water coming after us.

We went into a clothes shop and up to the first floor. There must have been about 20 people in there. I could see out of a window and it was a surreal sight. Cars and motor bikes were being swept along but so was almost everything else you could think of.

It felt like we stayed in the shop for hours but it was probably only about 30 minutes.

When we emerged it was a scene of complete chaos and devastation."

### Inside

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### Ukraine opposition in big exit poll lead

Nick Paton Walsh in Kiev

Ukraine's opposition leader, Viktor Yushchenko, was poised for a commanding victory last night in a re-run of disputed presidential elections that have riven the country and revived old cold war rivalry between Moscow and the west.

Three exit polls gave Mr Yushchenko and his orange-clad supporters a lead of at least 15 percentage points over the government candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, following

weeks of turmoil, drama and street protests.

The opposition victory, to be confirmed by preliminary results tonight, ends an ugly election battle in which Mr Yushchenko accused his rivals of trying to poison him, and Mr Yanukovich hit back with accusations that his opponents were being funded by the US.

Yesterday's vote was invoked after a run-off election in November was riddled with fraud and descended into a dangerous deadlock.

Mr Yanukovich claimed victory, but tens of thousands of Yushchenko supporters staged a two-week protest that forced the authorities to concede a re-run.

Last night, the three exit polls gave Mr Yushchenko between 56% and 58.1% of the votes and Mr Yanukovich between 38.4% and 41.3%.

Exit polls after the ill-fated November vote gave wildly fluctuating results that rapidly stoked the dispute.

After voting yesterday, Mr Yushchenko paid tribute to his

supporters, whose 16 days of demonstrations in the gathering Kiev winter culminated in the supreme court ordering a repeat election.

"What we did during the last 30 days was a tribute to our ancestors," he said. "I know they are looking at us from heaven and they are applauding."

While voting in Kiev, Mr Yanukovich said: "I voted for the future of Ukrainian people. I am waiting for Ukraine to make the right choice."

But hopes that a clear-cut result might reunite **Page 2**

### Hell hath no fury as a dad scorned

Gary Younge in New York

For three young boys in Texas, this Christmas Day was a little less exuberant than usual. When they failed to meet their irate father's injunction to improve their behaviour, he logged on to eBay and put their presents up for auction.

"No, Kidding," read the post of the Pasadena father. "Three undeserving boys have crossed the line. Tonight we sat down and showed them what they WILL NOT get for Christmas this year. I'll be taking the tree

down tomorrow. If you don't buy them, we'll return them to the store."

The children were warned the Nintendo DS video system was at risk after bad behaviour last week.

"We told them they were destroying each other and the calm and peace in the household. It had to stop," the anonymous father told the Houston Chronicle.

The boys – aged nine, 11 and 15 – promised to try harder but the next day they were up to their old tricks again.

That night, the 41-year-old father said he would indeed be putting \$700 (£364) in video console and games on to eBay.

By Christmas night the tree had gone and bidding for the gifts had stopped at \$1,700, with the proceeds going towards the family's church.

Although they did not get the best gifts their mother said they had received others: "The kids had a wonderful Christmas. It was as it should be, though a bit toned down."

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