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EXECUTIVE OFFICE
OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

Note to the Secretary-General

EARTHQUAKE OFF THE WEST COAST OF SUMATRA

1. A major earthquake struck off the west coast of Indonesia's Sumatra island on Monday 28 March, 11.09PM (Jakarta time) / 11.09AM (EST). The US Geological survey updated its original estimate of the magnitude of the earthquake from 8.2 richter scale to 8.7. There are also reports of aftershocks (magnitude 6.0 and 6.7 in the Nias region).
2. The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a statement warning that the earthquake has the **potential** to generate a widely destructive tsunami in the oceans near the earthquake. Authorities were requested to evacuate coasts within a thousand kilometers of the epicenter. It was also stated that authorities can assume that the danger has passed if no tsunami waves are observed in the region near the epicenter within three hours of the earthquake.
3. There have thus far been no reports of a tsunami. Given that the earthquake occurred during the night, it is difficult to fully assess the scale of the damage. As of now, widespread destruction is not being reported. The area most affected by the earthquake appears to be the group of islands off the Sumatra coast south of the epicenter. Some 10,000 persons reside on islands within a 50km radius of the epicenter. There are unconfirmed reports of 50 casualties and gross destruction on the island of Nias, about 870 miles northwest of Jakarta. Communication with the affected areas is difficult but is being pursued by my Office together with the UNCT in Indonesia.
4. Immediately after the earthquake was reported, OCHA established contact with field offices in Banda Aceh, Jakarta, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Maldives, India, Bangladesh and Somalia. UN officials are working with local authorities to ensure that the necessary preventive measures are being taken. Early warning mechanisms appear to have worked well in most of the concerned areas.
5. In Sumatra, all UN staff are accounted for. Staff from the Meulaboh and Chalang field offices moved to higher grounds and all staff have been advised to stay outdoors until the potential structural damage to buildings has been assessed. Initial assessments point to no major damage in Banda Aceh, Meulaboh and Chalang. According to UN DSS, the TNI and Police in Sumatra have control of the situation which is reported to be relatively calm.
6. The Security Management Team in Aceh, comprised of UN Agencies, has already held a meeting and a meeting between the Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator, several Heads of Agencies and the acting Governor in Banda Aceh is scheduled to take place on Tuesday 29 March, 7.30AM local time. Two inter-agency missions, medical teams, search and rescue teams and a helicopter are on stand by for assessments to the islands close to the epicenter. Reportedly, the Government of Indonesia has dispatched a

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military helicopter for an initial assessment. There are currently more than a thousand international staff, more than 250 humanitarian organizations and several boats and helicopters in Sumatra. This means that the international community is in a much better position to respond to any calamity than was the case on 26 December 2004.

7. I will keep you updated on further developments.


Jan Egeland
28 March 2005