

ASIA PACIFIC

Indonesia's Tsunami Sensors Were Down During Quake

By JOE COCHRANE MARCH 3, 2016

JAKARTA, Indonesia — Indonesia was compelled to rely on tsunami warnings from other nations' buoys in the Indian Ocean this week after a huge earthquake off the west coast of Sumatra because its detection system was disabled, a senior disaster agency official said on Thursday.

The earthquake struck on Wednesday night, had a magnitude of 7.8 and set off warnings in multiple countries, but it did not cause a tsunami. Indonesia's warning system, completed in 2008, has not been operable since last year, said Sutopo Purwo Nugroho, a spokesman for the National Disaster Management Agency.

Indonesia began deploying a chain of German-built buoys less than a year after the Indian Ocean tsunami of Dec. 26, 2004, which killed 230,000 people in more than a dozen countries, including around 177,000 in the Indonesian province of Aceh alone.

In the years since the system became operable, there have been occasional reports about pirates and fishermen stealing parts from the buoys or hauling them away to sell for scrap.

"There were 22 buoys, and as of last year, the last of them were not working due to them breaking down, or from theft or vandalism," Mr. Sutopo said.

"And we don't have funding for maintenance or to replace them," he said.

After the earthquake struck shortly before 8 p.m. on Wednesday, the country's meteorology agency, which runs its tsunami warning center, transmitted a warning about a possible tsunami to the disaster management agency and other government bodies based on readings from its seismograph network, Mr. Sutopo said.

He said Indonesia otherwise relied on rapid data from the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and from warning systems run by Australia and Thailand.

"It's difficult to ask the disaster management agency to make sure a tsunami is not happening," Mr. Sutopo said. "I think we need to build the buoy network again."

He said the cost for new buoys would be \$300,000 to \$600,000 each, depending on whether the Indonesian government bought units from the United States or built its own.

It was nearly two hours before the Indonesian center called off its tsunami warning on Wednesday night, long after its neighbors Thailand and Australia.

"We were still trying to check our tidal gauges to convince ourselves before canceling the announcement" about a possible tsunami, said Andi Eka Sakya, director general of the Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency. "What we get is from the tidal gauges."

Although the quake caused neither injuries nor significant property damage, it did dismay residents of the West Sumatra city of Padang; some fled to higher ground on foot or by motorcycle.

