

UNDP gives B21m to beef up wave alert

Warning systems will be ready by early-2006

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The United Nations Development Programme's approval of the US\$500,000 (21 million baht) project to improve the tsunami early-warning system will help Thailand to detect killer waves by early 2006.

The funds were provided via the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre yesterday to assist the Thai government in establishing both the national and regional early warning systems.

The project will begin with installation of two sea level gauge stations on the west coast of Thailand, one at Koh Taphao off Phuket coast and the other at Ko Miang in the Similan islands.

Suvit Yodmani, executive director of the ADPC, said the multi-purpose coastal gauges will monitor sea-level activity, wave surges and climate change data. The stations are to be connected via a satellite link to a wider regional network of 18 similar gauges across the Indian Ocean operated by the Global Sea-Level Observation System.

According to Mr Suvit, the system will provide Thailand with a greater level of accuracy in terms of tsunami detection and evaluation. There will also be training for the people in charge of operating and maintaining the sea level stations.

The system will be completely operational by early-2006, he added.

Besides the two gauge stations in Thailand, the ADPC also plans to install three more in Burma, Vietnam and the Philippines to create an effective regional network for tsunami warning systems.

If a tsunami is detected, the regional centre will inform and provide advisory to the national disaster centre. The decision to issue a warning will then depend on the national centre.

The sea level gauges, however, are different from the data buoy system demanded by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra early this week after a false alarm on Sunday night following the earthquake at the Nicobar Islands in India.

Mr Suvit said the data buoys are much more expensive and must be installed in the deep ocean.

"Those data buoys, as the prime minister said, are essential for a distant tsunami. But within a year, we also need the tide gauges and seismic stations that are up to international standards. These gauges are essential for a local tsunami," said Mr Suvit.

He said the model established in Thailand will also serve other countries that could be affected by tsunamis around the Mekong region, including Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

In the next part of the project, the ADPC will work with the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation to build community-based disaster risk management, community preparedness, as well as search and rescue capabilities.

Joana Merlin-Scholtes, the UNDP representative in Thailand, said the project will involve everyone from villagers to tambon leaders, government ministries and international experts to create comprehensive action plans for future natural and man-made disasters.

"Effective tsunami early warning depends just as much, if not more, on community involvement and awareness as it does on high tech solutions," said Ms Merlin-Scholtes.