

Tsunami in the Indian Ocean, 2004

In this unit you'll learn about tsunamis, and the damage they do. |

What is a tsunami?

A tsunami is a series of waves, set off by an earthquake in the ocean floor. The waves spread in all directions.

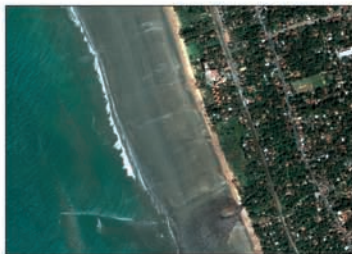
Out in the deep ocean the waves may be only a metre high. But they can travel at over 700 km an hour. As they approach a coast, and the water gets shallower, they get slower, and taller. When they finally hit land they can be up to 30m high. And they are deadly.

Tsunami in the Indian Ocean, 2004

On 26 December 2004, there was an earthquake in the floor of the Indian Ocean. It was the second largest ever recorded: 9.2 on the Richter scale. It set off a tsunami that led 230 000 people dead, and hundreds of thousands homeless. Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand suffered most. Follow the numbers below for more.



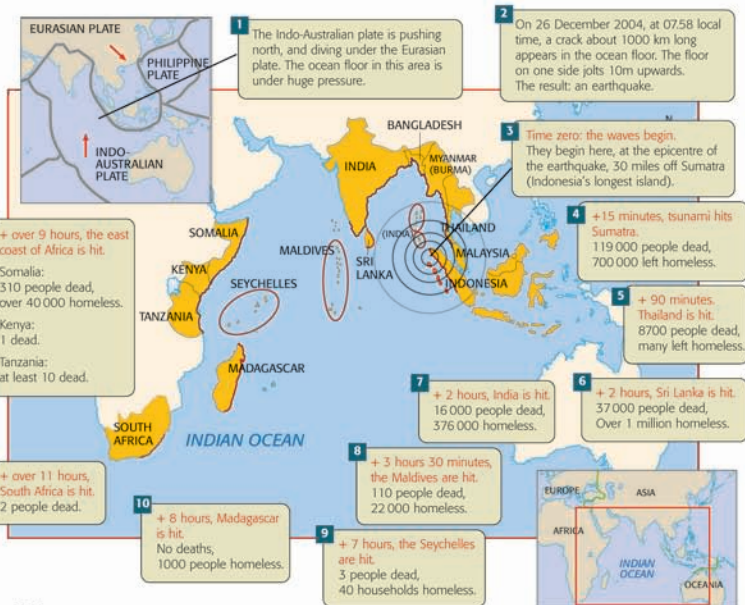
▲ People flee as the tsunami slams onto Raya island in Thailand.



▲ As a tsunami nears the coast, it sucks up water, exposing the ocean floor. This satellite image shows the water being dragged away, at the resort of Kalutara in Sri Lanka.



▲ The same resort, after the tsunami has struck. The water churns and recedes, leaving destruction behind it. Both images were taken on 26 December 2004.



The day they will never forget

Banda Aceh, Indonesia: I took an early ferry. I thought it was bouncing a bit, but that did not worry me. After an hour we got to Banda Aceh. I could not believe my eyes. The fishermen's homes along the water had gone. In the town, there were fishing boats on roof tops, and taxis stuck in trees. There were people sobbing, and corpses lying everywhere.

Telwatta, Sri Lanka: I was on the coast train, going see my family. Suddenly the train stopped. The sea started to pour in, very fast. The train turned over and over. I was trapped in there for nearly an hour, half drowned. But I'm lucky. They say there were 1500 passengers, and 800 of them died.

Khao Lak, Thailand: There was a hissing noise, and all the water along the beach got sucked out to sea. There were lots of fish left flapping on the ground. Children ran to look at them. Then there was a noise like thunder, and we saw a giant wave coming. The children had no chance.

Cuddalore, India: My two sons were playing cricket on the beach, with about 40 other children. I could hear them shouting and cheering. Then I looked down from the window and saw huge waves coming in, about 10 or 12 metres high. I froze. The water churned round and round. And then it sped out to sea, dragging them with it.

(Adapted from news reports, end December, 2004)



▲ Three days after the tsunami, on the island of Phi Phi in Thailand.

Did you know?

- In the Boxing Day tsunami, waves travelled nearly 5000 km from the epicentre to Africa.

Your turn

- 1 What causes a tsunami?
- 2 Try to explain these facts about the Boxing Day tsunami.
 - a The tsunami reached more than a dozen countries.
 - b The tsunami arrived at each at a different time.
 - c Indonesia suffered much greater loss than Somalia.
 - d People out at sea were not aware of the tsunami.
 - e The earthquake was detected in the Philippines, but no tsunami reached there.
- 3 People all over the world gave money to help the devastated places. Why do people do this?
- 4 Before the Boxing Day tsunami, there was a tsunami warning system in the Pacific Ocean (see pages 140–141) but none in the Indian Ocean. Suggest a reason.
- 5 It's your job to invent a tsunami warning system for the Indian Ocean. It must warn countries in good time when a tsunami is on the way. Tell us your ideas!