

Major earthquake hits Indonesia

By Michael Casey
Associated Press Writer

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia (AP) - A major earthquake struck off the west coast of Indonesia's Sumatra Island late Monday, damaging hundreds of buildings and sending residents fleeing in panic. Officials issued a tsunami warning for as far away as Sri Lanka.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the temblor, which occurred at 11:09 p.m. local time (11:09 a.m. EST), measured a magnitude of 8.2. A later reading put the magnitude at 8.7, said Paul Earle, a USGS research geophysicist.

Tsunami warnings were issued in Thailand, Japan and Sri Lanka, although officials in Thailand later called it off for that country. The only tsunami reported within four hours was a tiny one at the Cocos Islands, 1,400 miles west of Australia, meteorologists in Sydney said.

The worst damage was reported on Nias Island, off the Sumatran coast, close to the epicenter of the earthquake, and dozens may be buried in the rubble, said Agus Mendrofa, deputy district head on the island.

"Hundreds of buildings have been damaged or have collapsed. People who were standing fell over," Mendrofa said. "We're not sure about casualties, but there may be dozens of people buried in the rubble."

U.N. disaster relief coordinator Jan Egeland said there were unconfirmed reports of deaths. "The hard-hit population of western Sumatra have been again struck by a very large earthquake," Egeland said.

Nias, a renowned surfing spot, was badly hit by the Dec. 26 earthquake and subsequent tsunami that killed at least 175,000 people in 12 Indian Ocean nations and left another 106,000 missing. At least 340 residents of Nias perished and 10,000 were left homeless.

Indonesian officials said the quake's epicenter was 56 miles south of the island of Simeulu, off of Sumatra's western coast, and just north of Nias. It was described by one of the agency's geologists as an aftershock of the devastating Dec. 26 quake.

An aftershock measuring 6.0 was reported in the same region nearly 30 minutes later, the USGS said.

Preliminary indications are that energy from the quake might be directed toward the southwest, said Frank Gonzalez, an oceanographer with the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration in Seattle. He stressed that it was based on "very scanty information" about the epicenter and magnitude.

In Banda Aceh, the Sumatran city hit hardest in December, the quake briefly cut electricity. Thousands poured into the streets to flee low-lying areas.

The West Coast-Alaska tsunami warning center said that if no tsunami waves are observed in the region near the epicenter within three hours, then it is likely that the danger has passed.

"It seems this earthquake did not trigger a tsunami. If it had, the tsunami would have hit the coastline of Sumatra by now," said Prihar Yadi, a scientist with the Indonesia Geophysics Agency. "And if there's no tsunami on the coastline near the epicenter of the quake, there will not be one heading in the other direction."

Sirens blared along Sri Lanka's devastated east coast as the government warned seaside residents to evacuate immediately.

The International Red Cross in Geneva said their mobile phone systems were down so they haven't been able to talk to anyone on the ground in Indonesia.

At the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which was at the center of U.N. response to the Dec. 26 tsunami, Jamie McGoldrick said, "What's going on is a mobilization of people away from the coast."

Noted that the quake was "a weaker one than before" Dec. 26.

"There have been no reports of a tsunami and no initial reports of damage, but it's very early," said Rob Holden, a Geneva-based technical coordinator for the World Health Organization. "Police are now going around trying to calm people down."

Oceanographer David Burwell of the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Hawaii said the agency was watching water levels "but we don't have any gauges in that area." He said it would be a few hours before officials received any readings.

In Banda Aceh, the quake lasted about two minutes and felt like gentle swaying, like a rocking chair, causing people to feel dizzy. It woke people up and sent them running into the street.

People grabbed small bags of clothes as they fled their tents and homes. Many were crying and jumping into cars and onto motorbikes and pedicabs, heading for higher ground.

Two women wearing prayer shawls and sarongs grabbed a fence and chanted "Allahu Akbar," or "God is great."

"People are still traumatized, still scared, they are running for higher ground," said Feri, a 24-year-old recovery volunteer who goes by one name.

The quake was felt as far away as Malaysia, about 300 miles from the epicenter, sending panicked residents fleeing their apartments and hotels in Kuala Lumpur and Penang after authorities activated

fire alarms. Officials issued a tsunami warning for residents of southern Thai provinces, three months after a tsunami devastated parts of Indonesia and other countries in the region.

The quake occurred at a depth of 18.6 miles, and was centered 125 west-northwest of Sibolga, Sumatra, and 150 miles southwest of Medan, Sumatra, the USGS said.

The depth does not mean a lot for a quake this large, Earle said, calling it a near-surface earthquake and comparable to the one that occurred Dec. 26.

After the Dec. 26 quake, the agency initially recorded the depth of that temblor at six miles. Shallow earthquakes like that generally are more destructive because the seismic energy is closer to the surface and has less distance to travel.

Monday's quake was considered to be at a moderate depth. Tremors also were felt throughout peninsular Malaysia's west coast, causing thousands of residents to flee high-rise apartment buildings and hotels. There were no immediate reports of any casualties or major damage.

"I was getting ready for bed, and suddenly, the room started shaking," said Kuala Lumpur

resident Jessie Chong. "I thought I was hallucinating at first, but then I heard my neighbors screaming and running out."

Police were evacuating many residents from low-lying coastal areas in Malaysia's northern states of Penang and Kedah, said Penang Police Chief Christopher Wan.

"We are on the alert for the possibility of a tsunami within the next few hours," Wan said by telephone. "We're better prepared now compared to last year."

Tremors from the quake could be felt in the Thai capital Bangkok for several minutes beginning at about 11:20 p.m.

Chalermchai Aekkantrong, deputy director of Thailand's meteorological department, told a radio station Monday that officials were asking people near the coast to evacuate, although there were no immediate reports of a tsunami.

NOAA spokesman Greg Romano said the U.S. State Department was passing on warnings to foreign governments about the tsunami danger.

The USGS said the quake occurred on a segment of the same fault line that triggered the magnitude-9 earthquake on Dec. 26, the world's biggest in 40 years.

Maynulet's father, Rogelio Maynulet, and his wife, Brooke Maynulet, also took the stand as character witnesses. Several officers who have worked with the defendant in Iraq since he left his command in Iraq praised his work.

Maynulet's 1st Armored Division tank company had been on patrol near Kufa, south of Baghdad, on May 21, 2004, when it was alerted to a car thought to be carrying a driver for radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and another militiaman loyal to the Shiite cleric, who led uprisings against U.S.-led forces in Iraq last year.

They chased the vehicle and fired at it, wounding both the passenger, who fled and was later apprehended, and the driver.

Maynulet maintained that he shot the gravely wounded Iraqi to end his suffering.

The killing was taped by a U.S. drone surveillance aircraft.

In closing arguments earlier Thursday, prosecutor Maj. John Rothwell said that Maynulet "played God" when he shot the wounded driver.

U.S. soldier convicted in shooting death of Iraqi

By Melissa Eddy
Associated Press Writer

WIESBADEN, Germany (AP) - A military court Thursday convicted a U.S. Army tank company commander of a lesser criminal charge in connection with the shooting death of a wounded Iraqi last year.

Capt. Rogelio "Roger" Maynulet was found guilty of assault with intent to commit voluntary manslaughter, which carries a maximum of 10 years in prison. Prosecutors had sought conviction on a more serious charge of assault with intent to commit murder, which carried a 20-year maximum.

Maynulet, 30, of Chicago, stood at attention as Lt. Col. Laurence Mixon, the head of the six-member panel, read the verdict at the court-martial. The court was to reconvene later Thursday to consider Maynulet's sentence.

Mixon did not give reasons for the ruling, which followed 2 1/2 hours of deliberations.

At the sentencing hearing, Maynulet asked the court for leniency, occasionally pausing and looking down to keep his composure.

"I hope you can take into consideration my service, my attitude and my love for the Army before you make a decision," Maynulet said. "I respect your decision. I wouldn't want to be in your position. I think you did what you have to do."

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In closing arguments earlier Thursday, prosecutor Maj. John Rothwell said that Maynulet "played God" when he shot the wounded driver.

He argued that Maynulet, who was trained in first aid, should not have relied on a medic who said the man was beyond saving and told him "there's nothing I can do."

"Those five words were enough to make a life and death decision, and he chose to end a life," Rothwell said. "This combat-trained life saver prescribed two bullets. He didn't call his superiors for guidance, didn't consult with his medic."

Maynulet said at this week's court-martial that he shot the man to "put him out of his misery." His lawyers have argued that his actions were in line with the Geneva Conventions on the conduct of war.

His defense attorney, Capt. Will Helixon, argued that conflicting testimony from neurosurgeons about whether the Iraqi was still alive at the time of the shooting required that Maynulet be acquitted.

Maynulet's command was suspended May 25, but he has remained with the Wiesbaden-based unit.

The U.S. military has referred to the Iraqi driver only as an "unidentified paramilitary member" and has not named al-Sadr directly - instead referring to a "high-profile target" - but relatives named the driver as Karim Hassan, 36, and said he worked for al-Sadr.



A woman turns to look at the storm clouds gathering before the earthquake. Photo courtesy of boston.com

U.S. bases in Afghanistan get upgrade

By Stephen Graham
Associated Press Writer

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) - The United States is spending \$83 million to upgrade its two main air bases in Afghanistan, an Air Force general said Monday, the latest indication that American forces will remain in the country for years.

Brig. Gen. Jim Hunt said the money was being spent on construction projects already underway at Bagram Air Base, north of Kabul, and Kandahar Air Field in the south. A new runway is being built at Bagram, the biggest Afghan airfield used by the U.S. military.

"We are continuously improving runways, taxiways, navigation aids, airfield lighting, billeting and other facilities to support our demanding mission," Hunt said at a news conference in the capital.

Afghan leaders are seeking a long-term "strategic partnership" with the United States, which expects to complete the training of the country's new 70,000-strong army next year.

It remains unclear if that will include permanent American bases in a region that includes Iran, nuclear rivals India and Pakistan and oil-rich Central Asia. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said on a visit to Kabul earlier this month that Washington had not decided how long to keep troops here.

U.S. commanders have said they may cut their 17,000-strong force this year if a Taliban insurgency wanes, but say the Afghan government remains vulnerable and that some kind of U.S. presence will be needed for years.

In an interview with CNN's "Late Edition," Army Gen. John Abizaid, the commander of U.S. Central Command, said fresh skirmishes

along the Pakistani frontier showed "the fight is not out of the Taliban completely, and not out of the al-Qaida people that are operating in that region."

Asked where Osama bin Laden might be, Abizaid said only that "an awful lot of al-Qaida leadership" was operating in the mountainous border region and that U.S. troops were watching the area "with great interest."

Hunt said 150 U.S. aircraft, including ground-attack jets and helicopter gunships as well as transport and reconnaissance planes, were using 14 airfields around Afghanistan. Many are close to the Pakistani border. Other planes such as B-1 bombers patrol over Afghanistan without landing.

"We will continue to carry out the ... mission for as long as necessary to secure a free and democratic society for the people of Afghanistan," Hunt said.

American officials have said that fixing the runway at Bagram will make it suitable for Dutch F-16 fighters expected to deploy this year in support of the separate NATO-run security force in Afghanistan.

U.S. forces are currently vacating Shindand Air Base, close to the Iranian border, as NATO expands into the west of the country, Hunt said.

He said the forces under his command tried hard not to stray over Afghanistan's borders and said he was unaware of any spying missions over neighboring Iran. Pakistani officials complain regularly of American planes violating their airspace.

"We want to make sure that we and Afghanistan are good neighbors to the entire area, so we are very careful and very sensitive to the international borders, both to the west and to the east," Hunt said.

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