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The Tsunami: A Historical Perspective

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The earthquake off the coast of Sumatra and the massive tsunami it generated on the morning of Dec. 26, 2004 has already entered the record books as one of the worst natural disasters of modern times.

The scope of this calamity can only be fully measured when looking at a map of the Indian Ocean or measuring it against the magnitude of other earthquakes listed by the U.S. Geological Survey. The Dec. 26 event was magnitude 9.0. Of the more than 100 earthquakes listed in *The World Almanac* since 1886, only two generated a 9.0-plus magnitude: a 9.5 May 1962 in South Chile and a 9.2 March 27, 1964 in Alaska. However, in both cases, the destruction was confined to relatively small areas with limited populations. This was not the case Dec. 26. The tsunami that followed the earthquake affected the entire rim of the Indian Ocean. It began off the coast of Sumatra in Indonesia on the eastern edge of the Indian Ocean and its power was felt in all land masses that border it as well as the islands that dot its surface.



Death and misery from natural disasters is not new, however. Floods, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, and blizzards have claimed the lives of millions over the centuries. But it is the tidal waves, earthquakes and tsunamis that rank as the most lethal, closely followed by floods.

The story of the lost civilization of Atlantis, the biblical story of the flood, Italy's Pompeii, and the ruins that dot the landscape of the Middle East have captured our imaginations. Without much warning, night fell on the future. Some civilizations rebuilt. Others disappeared. Exactly how many died from natural disasters in the distant past will never be known.

In 1228, the region of Europe now known as Holland was nearly washed away. In 1642, an estimated 300,000 people drowned from a flood in China. China also experienced two deadly floods in the 20th century: in 1911, 100,000 died and in August 1931, an incredible 3.7 million perished in the Huang He River Basin. Earthquakes have also taken an incredible toll. In 526, Antioch in Syria was nearly wiped off the map. Calcutta lost an estimated 300,000 people in 1737. When an 8.3 earthquake struck Nan-Shan, China, May 22, 1927, 200,000 perished. The great quake in Yokohama, Japan Sept. 1, 1923 claimed 143,000 lives, and a generation ago—July 27, 1976—an 8.0 quake in Tangshan, China, claimed 250,000 lives.

While the death toll from the Dec. 26 tsunami may reach the 200,000 mark, with 100,000 in Indonesia alone and another 30,000 in Sri Lanka, it is the scale of the devastation that is unparalleled. We are just beginning to assess the damage and lives lost in out-of-the-way places such as Aceh in northern Sumatra and on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. On-the-scene reporters tell us it looks like an atomic bomb was dropped. It may take a decade for these places to rebuild because many of these nations do not have the resources. The per capita income of the Maldives is less than \$1,800. In Sri Lanka, with a population of 20 million, the per capita income is less than \$2,600. Five percent of the population has been displaced, left homeless, and lost its means to make a living from the ocean. It is the same story in Thailand, Indonesia and India.

In an age when the world is increasingly divided along religious and ethnic lines, perhaps now is the time for a fresh start. The Dec. 26, 2004 tsunami reminded us of the fragility of civilization and in its wake, the oneness of mankind. Rarely, has there been such an outpouring of sympathy and financial help. We can only hope that this translates into the East and West pulling closer together.