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Asia marks fifth anniversary of Indian Ocean tsunami

Countries across the Indian Ocean on Saturday marked the fifth anniversary of the catastrophic tsunami that killed almost 250,000 people, media reports said.

In Indonesia's Aceh province, where 170,000 died, thousands held prayers in public mosques and private homes, BBC reported.

On Thai beaches, Buddhist monks chanted prayers as mourners held pictures of loved ones lost five years ago.

Hundreds of tourists also returned to Phuket island to mark one of the worst natural disasters of modern times.

A moment of silence was observed on Phuket's popular Patong Beach marking the time the tsunami struck.

German survivor Ruschitschka Adolf, 73, and his wife Katherina waded into the turquoise seawater to lay white roses as a tribute to the dead.

Thousands of survivors in Indonesia's Aceh province, the hardest-hit area, gathered at mosques and beside the mass graves where tens of thousands were buried.

After Indonesia, Sri Lanka was the country worst hit by the tsunami.

More than 40,000 people died there and half a million were displaced.

Families of tsunami victims in coastal areas in the eastern, southern and western provinces took part in the religious events as the nation observed a two-minute silence in memory of those killed, DPA adds.

In Karathivu, 350 km east of Colombo, villagers displayed photographs of some 400 people killed in the tsunami and gathered for a Hindu ceremony.

"Although the infrastructure, including houses have been rebuilt, each of these families is still devastated as they not only miss their loved ones, but also remember that terrible day," resident Sivalingam Muttusamy said.

He said that almost every family in the fishing village was affected, with some losing three to four family members.

In the southern coastal areas of Galle and Matara, which are predominantly Buddhist, monks held commemorative ceremonies.

Some of the families visited Buddhist temples and offered alms to monks to invoke blessings on those who died, keeping with the belief that their offerings would bring merit on their dead family members.

The majority of those displaced by the tsunami have found new homes, but some are unhappy about the new locations, as they are too far inland.

"Our families have been affected as we have been settled about two kilometres inland. We were fishermen by profession and now find it difficult to engage in fishing," said Nimal Gamini from Galle.

The government initially declared a buffer zone ranging from one kilometre to 500 metres from the sea. The decision resulted in some sea-side dwellers being relocated. However, the restrictions were lifted nearly a year after the tsunami.

More than 100,000 houses, shops and other buildings were damaged or destroyed in the tsunami.

The tsunami was sparked by a 9.2-magnitude earthquake off the Indonesian island of Sumatra - the mightiest earthquake in 40 years.

In Aceh province, the quake toppled homes and buildings and sent panicked residents rushing into the streets.

About 20 minutes later, a wall of water up to six storeys high surged in from the sea, burying thousands in thick black mud and leaving others to scramble up buildings or cling onto trees.

Apart from the deaths, hundreds of thousands people lost their homes and livelihoods.

No single agency or government could have been prepared for the challenges the tsunami presented, BBC's South-East Asia correspondent says. Some 14 countries were hit by massive tsunami waves.

Following the disaster, the UN has been designated to coordinate relief work in massive disaster zones.

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