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Massive quake off Indonesia brings back tsunami fears

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Amitabh Sinha : New Delhi, Thu Apr 12 2012, 01:32 hrs

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The people and administration in states along the eastern coast of India spent a nervous two hours this afternoon after a powerful undersea earthquake and aftershocks off Indonesia triggered fears of a tsunami similar to the one that killed more than 150,000 people in Indian Ocean nations over seven years ago.

The waves the earthquake triggered were, however, too weak to cause any damage. In most places, they were barely noticeable, and the most the sea rose in India was 30 cm, in Campbell Bay in the Nicobar islands.

In Chennai, the sea rose 10 cm; in Vizag, 8 cm. Even in Indonesia, the maximum rise in sea level was only 60 cm.

The earthquake itself, measuring 8.6 on the Richter scale and with its epicentre in the seismically volatile Sumatra region, was felt all along India's eastern coast and as far inland as Bihar, Jharkhand, Kerala and Karnataka.

Panic-stricken people came out of buildings as warnings of a likely tsunami were flashed on TV. In Kolkata, Metro services were suspended for about 45 minutes to enable engineers to inspect tunnels and tracks for any damage. Many offices were closed for the remainder of the day.

State administrations in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh asked fishermen at sea to return immediately. Beaches and picnic spots close to the sea were evacuated. Personnel of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) were deployed in Chennai; additional personnel were kept on standby in Delhi to fly out at short notice.

The Tsunami Warning Centre in Hyderabad issued an alert immediately after the quake struck at 2.08 pm India time. For some areas in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, it issued a warning — meaning that people needed to be evacuated from coastal areas.

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Generally, an alert follows apprehensions of tsunami waves of height between 0.5 m and 2 m; a warning is issued if they are expected to be bigger.

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