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Experts warn 'big one' may yet hit Indonesia

- Story Highlights
- Seismologists warn that worst may yet be ahead
- Strong 6.4-magnitude quake strikes Sumatra, reports USGS
- 3 strong quakes strike Sulawesi and Sumatra Thursday, total 13 people dead
- Great 8.4 quake strikes western coast of Sumatra Wednesday

PADANG, Indonesia (CNN) -- Days of colossal earthquakes and tsunami warnings have forced traumatized Indonesian villagers to seek safety in the last place imaginable: graveyards.

With only plastic sheeting to keep her family dry, Dasima joined hundreds camping in the mud between headstones on the flat, high ground, far from the ocean's reach.

"I am very afraid of another tsunami," the 50-year-old said two days after an 8.4-magnitude temblor sent a towering wave into her remote fishing village. "We will stay here until we feel it is safe."

Seismologists warn, however, the worst may be yet to come.

Kerry Sieh of the California Institute of Technology has spent decades studying the fault line that runs along Indonesia's western coast. He is among several experts predicting a repeat of the powerful earthquake that triggered the 2004 Asian tsunami, which killed more than 230,000 people in a dozen Indian Ocean nations.

"No one can say whether it will be in 30 seconds or 30 years," he said. "But what happened the other day, I think is quite possibly a sequence of smaller earthquakes leading up to the bigger one."

Wednesday's quake shook four Southeast Asian countries, damaged hundreds of houses and spawned a 10-foot-high tsunami. At least 17 people were killed. A series of powerful earthquakes and dozens of strong aftershocks followed -- including one measuring 7.8 and another 7.1.

The wall of water that slammed into several fishing villages along Sumatra island's coast Wednesday swept away nearly a dozen houses, but overall damage was "minimal," Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said after an air force aerial survey.

A nine-member U.N. assessment team reached the same conclusion after visiting the area, saying that a major international relief operation was not required, John Holmes, the U.N.'s emergency relief coordinator, said in a statement from New York.

Many people said a public awareness campaign launched after the 2004 tsunami paid off, including warnings issued over mosque speakers and training provided by local officials on how to escape a disaster.

"When the earth started shaking, some people yelled, 'It's time to go up the hill ... Let's get going,'" said Fadil, 35, a father of two, describing how he and hundreds of neighbors watched from above as the 10-foot wave approached. Hundreds of houses were damaged, but no one died.

Elsewhere, however, electricity blackouts prevented some sirens from going off.

The latest quakes -- together with the 9.0-magnitude temblor in 2004 and an 8.7 quake in early 2005 -- deeply concern experts.

The fault, which runs the length of the west coast of Sumatra about 125 miles offshore, is the meeting point of the Eurasian and Pacific tectonic plates, which have been pushing against each other for millions of years, causing huge stresses to build up.

"There is a strong indication this foreshadows the big one," said Danny Hillman, an earthquake specialist at the Indonesian Institute of Science. "We all agree there is an 8.5 or stronger earthquake waiting to happen."

That's exactly what residents along Sumatra's western coast, which is expected to bear the brunt of the next disaster, are worried about. The island was hardest hit by the 2004 tsunami, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the deaths.

In the fishing village of Sungai Pisang, just south of the badly damaged city of Padang, hundreds of people were too scared to return home after the recent tremors sent a large wave washing into their bay.

Indonesia, the world's largest archipelago, with a population of 235 million people, is prone to seismic upheaval due to its location on the "Ring of Fire," an arc of volcanos and fault lines encircling the Pacific Basin.

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