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Asia marks tsunami's fifth anniversary with prayer

By Jason Sze

PATONG, Thailand (Reuters) - Thousands of candles lit up Thailand's Patong beach, thousands of saffron-robed Buddhist monks marched and people held vigils as Asia marked the fifth anniversary of the Indian Ocean tsunami on Saturday.

Hundreds of lanterns floated into the sky at Patong in one of many events across the region in memory of one of history's worst natural disasters when towering waves crashed ashore with little warning, killing 226,000 people in 13 countries.

"We came here to remember those who died," said Sainamphueng Kachan, 32, who lost 20 friends in the tsunami and was among the tourists, mourners and tsunami survivors gathered in bustling Patong to light candles dug into holes in the beach.

In Indonesia's Banda Aceh, about 100 people took part in a prayer ceremony close to a fishing boat that landed on the rooftop of a two-storey house after being swept miles inland.

Indonesia was the worst hit with more than 166,000 dead and missing. Massive reconstruction aid in Banda Aceh has rebuilt a new city on top of the ruins but survivors are only now putting memories of the disaster behind them.

Some villagers shed tears as they remembered the day their homes and lives were destroyed by the wall of water that rose as high as 30 metres (98 ft), triggered by an undersea earthquake off the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

"I will never forget it in all my life. After the earthquake, we ran out of the house and within minutes people screamed on seeing the towering water," said Ambasih, 40, owner of the house with the fishing boat where about 50 people took refuge.



A Red Cross volunteer sits between open umbrellas printed with portraits of smiling children representing children orphaned in the Indian Ocean tsunami, during its fifth anniversary at the Tsunami museum in Banda Aceh December 26, 2009. (REUTERS/Beawiharta)

"When the water got higher, suddenly a boat landed on top of the house. We climbed and stayed there until afternoon. We saw the waves from atop."

Indonesian Vice President Boediono attended another ceremony in Ulee Lheu, a port about 5 km (3 miles) from Banda Aceh which was worst hit by the tsunami.

"After five years, the government of Aceh and Aceh people, with the help of the central government and the international society, have resurrected Aceh to start a new life and rebuild Aceh," he told a gathering of about 1,000 people.

Some locals such as Taufik Rahmat say they have moved on, helped along by new homes in the Banda Aceh region following one of the largest foreign fund-raising exercises. But still pockets of people in his village remain homeless.

"Not all elements have been fulfilled, I think about 80 percent to 90 percent of the people still don't have proper housing," he said.

FRIGHTENED OF THE SEA

Thousands of Buddhist monks chanted and marched in Ban Nam Khem, a small fishing village on Thailand's Andaman Sea coast that lost nearly half its 5,000 people.

"All souls from all nationalities, wherever you are now, please receive the prayers the monks are saying for you," said Kularb Pliamyai, who lost 10 family members in Ban Nam Khem.

Ban Nam Khem village is a shadow of its former self. Its once-thriving centre of dense waterfront stores, restaurants and wooden homes is gone, replaced with souvenir shops, a wave-shaped monument and a small building filled with photographs of the tsunami recovery effort.

Many former residents are now too frightened of the sea to rebuild close to the water.

"I still feel bad about what happened. People from all over the world were killed here. It's their misfortune," Kularb said.

In Thailand, 5,398 people were killed, including several thousand foreign tourists, when the waves swamped six coastal provinces, turning some of the world's most beautiful beaches into mass graves. Many are still missing.

In Patong, local artists performed traditional Thai songs and Buddhist monks chanted as tourists and locals gathered in a pavilion to look at photographs of the tsunami's damage.

"We come and stay here because we are alive," said Ruschitschka Adolf, a 73-year-old German who survived the tsunami, as his wife Katherina waded into Patong's turquoise waters to lay white roses in the waves in memory of the dead.

Almost all of those killed were on holiday on or around the southern island of Phuket, a region that had contributed as much as 40 percent of Thailand's annual tourism income.

AID DRYING UP

Tsunami aid efforts have mostly finished, said Patrick Fuller, Tsunami Communications Coordinator at the Red Cross.

"A lot of the physical reconstruction has ended. There are some major infrastructure projects that are still going on. There are some road projects, longer term projects. But all the housing projects are pretty much wrapped up," he said.

The Red Cross built 51,000 houses over the past five years, mostly in the Maldives and Indonesia.

But locals say they need more than new buildings, clean-water plants and other infrastructure.

"The economy has not recovered," said Rotjana Phraesrithong, who is in charge of the Baan Tharn Namchai Orphanage, opened in 2006 for 35 children who lost parents in the tsunami.

Dozens of small hotels and resorts are up for sale in Thailand's Phang Nga province north of Phuket whose forested coastline includes Ban Nam Khem and the serene 19-km (12-mile) Khao Lak beach, two of Thailand's worst tsunami-hit areas.

"More than 100 of these small hotels and retail tour operators are looking to sell their operations because they can't obtain loans from banks to keep going," said Krit Srifa, president of the Phang Nga Tourism Association.

On Khao Lak beach, where the tsunami killed 3,000 people, mourners lit 2,552 traditional Khomloy floating paper lanterns -- a number representing the Thai Buddhist calendar year when the tsunami struck.

(Additional reporting by Masako Iijima, Reza Munawir and Heru Asprihanto in Banda Aceh and Vorasit Satienlerk and Noppawan Bunlueslip in Thailand; Editing by Louise Ireland)