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Post-tsunami recovery will take about a decade: UN agencies

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by Peter Capella

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GENEVA, May 23 (AFP) - Countries hit by last December's devastating tsunami around the Indian Ocean will take at least five to 10 years to recover with the help of international aid, United Nations agencies said Monday.

Technical experts underlined after a meeting organised by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) that recovery efforts needed to tackle problems with poverty, conflicts or land disputes that existed before the tsunami struck, on top of reconstruction.

"You're very rarely talking about a process of less than five years and usually it's more like 10 years," UNDP disaster recovery specialist Andrew Maskrey told journalists.

The UNDP cautioned that the region was in "a critical stage of transition" that would determine the shape of reconstruction and said that it wanted to "build back better, build back stronger".

"We have to be careful of the tyranny of rush: trying to get things done quickly can actually put us behind in the long run," said Kathleen Cravero Head of the UNDP Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR), adding that the process was "well underway".

The agency warned against rebuilding "the conditions of risk" that existed before the disaster in the Indonesian province of Aceh, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the Maldives.

"Recovery, despite the horrific nature of the disaster, does provide an opportunity to build back better and address the development challenges that had been with these communities for quite some time," Cravero said.

Housing would be improved, protected from recurrent natural disasters, backed by improved health and education services, and the effort would also try to ensure lower levels of malnutrition.

Aceh, the hardest hit area, suffered losses estimated at 4.5 billion dollars, equivalent to the province's entire Gross Domestic Product (GDP), according to UNDP data.

The tsunami, which killed 128,645 people there, directly affected livelihoods by wiping out housing, trade, farming and fisheries.

In Thailand, 500 fishing villages were the most affected, while 120,000 people lost jobs in the tourism industry and some 6,800 homes were destroyed or damaged.

The tourism paradise of the Maldives suffered "stunning" damages in financial terms of 470 million dollars, nearly two-thirds of its annual economic output, the UNDP said.

Damage in Sri Lanka reached one billion dollars, leaving 516,000 displaced and in need of permanent shelter, while 100,000 homes were destroyed in some of the poorest parts of the country.

As the experts took stock of the shift from the declining emergency relief operation into the recovery phase, they said local and national authorities would increasingly be at the forefront of

an ever more complex effort.

"There was one tsunami in Asia on December 26, but there is not one disaster," said Andrew Maskrey of **UNDP**.

"We cannot talk about a recovery process in the Indian Ocean, we have to talk about different recovery processes in each of the affected countries, and within these countries," he added.

Other challenges included coordination of all the actors involved, and financial transparency in using the billions of dollars in aid pledges that have been made in areas that were sometimes blighted by corruption.

Indonesia especially had been lowly rated in corruption assessments, an official pointed out.

"When you have seven billion dollars committed over the next five years, you can imagine how this problem could be aggravated," said Praveen Pardeshi, of the UN's disaster reduction unit.

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