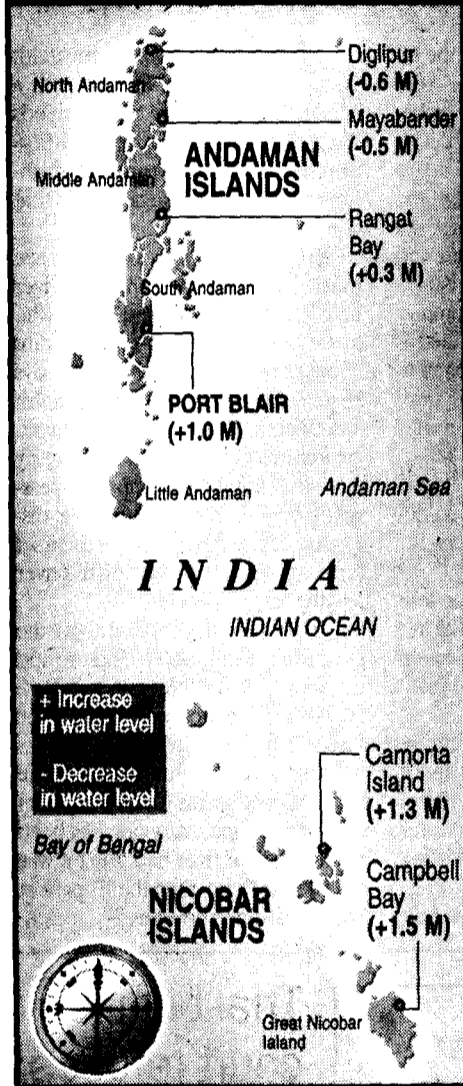


**Coastal depth changes at
Naval ports on the
A&N Islands**



Graphic: AJIT KUMAR

17 MAY 2005

RS. 200 CRORES FOR IMMEDIATE RELIEF

Manmohan promises all help to tsunami-hit in Andamans

By Vinay Kumar

PORT BLAIR, JAN. 8. The Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, today visited the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to see for himself the extent of devastation caused by the December 26 tsunami tidal waves. A visibly moved Dr. Singh extended the Centre's helping hand to the survivors of the tragedy to rebuild their homes and their lives.

Assuring all assistance to the traumatised people, Dr. Singh said the Centre would provide food, shelter, education and employment to the affected families whose sources of livelihood had been wiped out by the killer waves.

For the Prime Minister, it was a journey of sorrowful discovery. In one relief camp after another — across several villages in Campbell Bay, Car Nicobar and Port Blair — he heard from the inhabitants heart-rendering tales of survival.

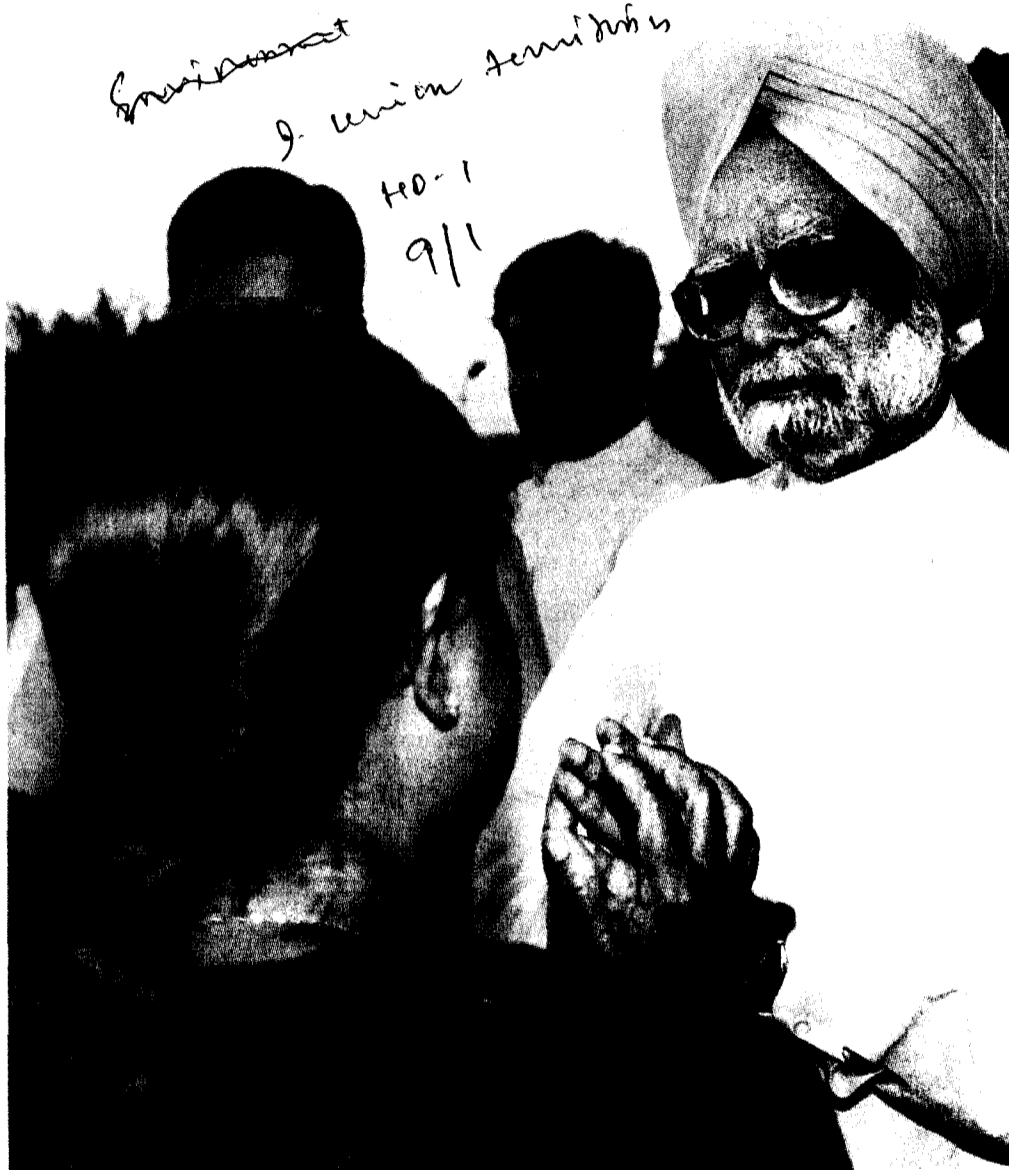
The victims narrated how the tsunami flattened villages, uprooted houses and cut off vital road links. He got a first-hand account of destruction from eye-witnesses and victims, some of whom survived without food and water for three to four days before they were rescued.

"We will do everything possible for you. All possible assistance by the Government will be given. It may be free ration, help to rebuild houses, roads and schools. I am with you in this hour of crisis and I have come from Delhi to lend my support to you," an emotionally moved Dr. Singh told the survivors.

The Prime Minister saw the flattened colony of the Indian Air Force officers at the Car Nicobar Airbase, visited relief camps in Campbell Bay, Kakan and Malacca villages in Car Nicobar and other relief camps in Port Blair.

The spread, sheer magnitude and the scale of the tsunami tragedy easily dwarfed the super cyclone of Orissa and the Gujarat earthquake, said several workers of disaster management teams in Car Nicobar.

What Dr. Singh saw today on his day-long visit to the southern part of the devastated islands was only a sample of the fury that was unleashed on the islands and southern coastal States about a fortnight ago.



Prime Minister Manmohan Singh consoling a tsunami victim at a relief camp in Port Blair on Saturday. — AFP

Several villages still remain inaccessible but rescuers have not called off their mission.

Expressing sympathy with the victims at the Campbell Bay relief camp, Dr. Singh said the lives wiped out by the tsunami tragedy could not be brought back but the Government would help the survivors pick up the threads of their lives again.

It was a "national tragedy," he said. Later, he announced an aid of Rs.200 crores to the local government for implementing immediate rehabilitation measures.

Beyond the immediate relief, the Centre will focus on comprehensive rehabilitation plans for the islands to be implemented "in a project mode." In

addition, school examinations for Classes X and XII will be held a few months later, mobile telephone connectivity will be

provided in major islands and additional helicopter services be provided by Pawan Hans.

More reports on Page 2

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How last 50 saved themselves from extinction

The Great Andamanese Escape...

NEELESH MISRA IN PORT BLAIR

Jan. 8. — The last few dozen remaining members of an ancient indigenous tribe in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands said they raced up a mountain to escape the devastating tsunami — and avoid extinction.

"No one was hurt. Everyone is all right," Jiroki, the king of the Great Andamanese tribe, said on Friday from a hospital in Port Blair.

"The water was rushing up very fast. It seemed to be following us," said his wife, Surmayee. "We stayed in the forest for 5 days. There was some rice. We ate that. Then there was nothing, so we went hungry." The Great Andamanese were once the largest tribe in the region with an estimated population of 10,000 in 1789. The government says only 43 Great Andamanese remain, while Jiroki says there are 50, of whom 10 are his children.

Anthropologists believe the five ancient tribes, including the Jarawas, Shompens, Onges and Sentinelese, date back 70,000 years.

Rescuers last week brought the remaining Great Andamanese to Port Blair in the wake of the tsunami. Jiroki, whose tribe lives in a forest on Strait Island in the south of the archipelago, seized the opportunity to seek treatment for epilepsy at a state-run hospital.

Speaking in broken Hindi, Jiroki and Surmayee said that when the earthquake jolted their homes on Strait Island,

they ordered the tribe to flee. "I am the king. They follow what I say," said Jiroki, wearing a red T-shirt and shorts. "We asked the wireless operator to send a message to Port Blair. But the machine and battery had been damaged by flood waters." The island's jetty was smashed so no boats could land. The tribe members' clothes, utensils and other household articles were all washed away, Surmayee said.

And contrary to speculation by some anthropologists, she said the Great Andamanese did not sense the impending arrival of the tsunamis. Some experts say the Great Andamanese are a sad example of how indigenous people quickly lose centuries of tradition and culture when they come in contact with the outside world. "I have written them off. They hardly have a culture or tradition of their own," said Samir Acharya, head of the independent Andaman and Nicobar Society. "They have all forgotten their own dialect. They are mostly acting as copycats of the rest of us." The tribe maintains links with government officials, and a police officer, a wireless operator and a doctor's assistant live with them on Strait Island. Some members of the tribe work in police and government jobs in Port Blair.

The tribal leaders admitted their lifestyles are different from those of their ancestors. "We don't use bows and arrows now. We hunt fish and pigs with spears," Surmayee said. The Great Andamanese traditionally eat roots, seafood, turtles and turtle eggs, but in recent years have begun eating rice, pulses and bread. "They are exposed to highly communicable diseases besides unhealthy drinking habits which, of course, are acquired after contact with the moribund dominant and advanced communities," according to the Andaman and Nicobar government website.

Surmayee was ready to leave the city and return home on Friday. "I want to go back. I don't like it here. I am used to being in the forest," she said. But her husband disagreed. "We feel nice interacting with the outside world. Earlier our heart was only in hunting," Jiroki said. "There were no movies, nothing".

Good news on the Onge front

Amid the death and devastation, there was some good news for the fast dwindling Onge tribe. A baby was born to a couple in the worst hit Hut Bay. The couple was picked up after rescuers spotted them with a three-day-old baby. As per the 2001 Census, the Onge population stood at 96. Two more babies were born to tsunami-hit couple during evacuation from Nicobar to Port Blair recently. — AP

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THE STATESMAN

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Members of the tribe. — A file photo

Tide of tears and touch of hope

BAPPA MAJUMDAR

Port Blair, Jan. 8: Maggie Thomas had always dreamed of meeting an Indian Prime Minister in person. The 65-year-old's wish came true today — but at the cost of her entire family.

Face to face with Manmohan Singh, the Nicobarese woman burst into tears. "It took a tsunami to finally get the country's Prime Minister here," she sobbed. "It also took him 13 days after the devastation to finally reach, but all our anger and hopelessness have gone away, and we will start afresh."

The words, so long bottled up inside, tumbled out as Singh touched her head and said: "I know it is hard, but try to put behind the tragedy as a bad dream of the last year and work towards renewal. I promise to help you all to start afresh in a new year."

Singh, who arrived this morning, touched several heads in the crowd that had gathered around him. Hundreds of hands reached out to touch him as he mingled with grieving women and children in tsunami-ravaged Andaman and Nicobar and promised to speed up rehabilitation.

After a visit to the devastated Car Nicobar air base and relief camps in Malacca and Campbell Bay, Singh turned up at the Island Tourism Festival grounds, now turned into a relief camp for the Nicobarese, around 5 pm. Scheduled to stay for about 15 minutes at the camp, he spent over 35 minutes, listening to tales of loss. Touched by the devastation, though he was forced to cut short his visit to other camps



A woman with her son at a relief camp in Car Nicobar. (Reuters) ■ See Pages 2 & 4

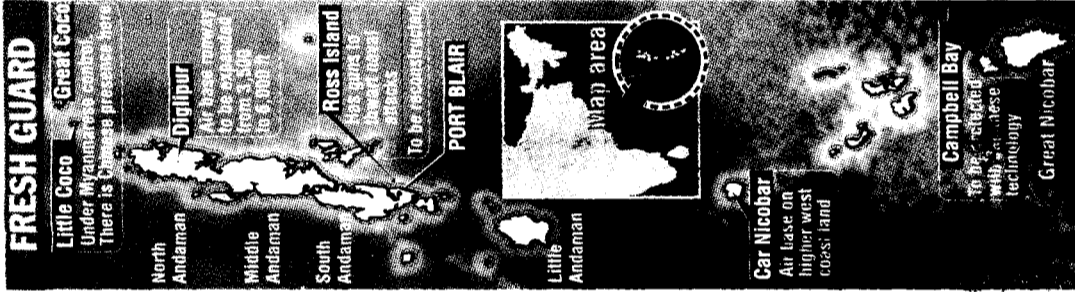
because of a tight schedule, the Rs 200-crore relief package to be used for providing food, temporary housing, employment programmes and also to help the tribal councils.

Singh said more long-term packages would be announced soon for education of orphans, "Keeping in mind the exten-

sive seismic and tidal activity that is going on, the government will immediately constitute a team of scientific experts to study the submergence, tidal patterns and seismic patterns to help locate places for resettlement," he said.

Several of the southern group of islands were inundated by the tsunami, which battered strategic defence installations, almost wiping out the air base on Car Nicobar.

The necessity arises also because of the growing strength of the Chinese naval fleet



Port Blair, Jan. 8: After getting emergency relief work off the ground in Andaman and Nicobar, the military has begun to plan ahead to reconstruct its tsunami-destroyed facilities and create new ones.

A six-member team from the three components of the armed forces is here, visiting all affected areas with the objective of rebuilding the bases in a manner that can stand up to tsunamis.

"We will be looking at Japanese technology because they are used to tsunamis and their installations are strong enough to withstand tsunamis, which can also be triggered by a small earthquake (6.6 on the Richter scale) in the ocean bed. Our reconstruction work will be stronger than before," Commodore V.K. Bhansali, part of the elite team, said.

If the first part of the post-tsunami work by the integrated command of the three armed forces was Operation Madad (help), the next will be Operation Necessity.

To start with, at the air base in Diglipur, the length of the runway will be increased to 6,000 feet from 3,500. Two new defence installations are likely to come up at Pahargao and Calicut near Port Blair.

"We have chosen about 20 acres of land in Pahargao

in the region and a modern air base set up by them on the Coco Islands, territory under Myanmar's control to the north of the Andamans.

"Although Coco Islands are Myanmar territory, the Chinese presence there cannot be denied. Moreover, their naval fleet is increasing every day. Whoever controls the oceans will rule and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is the first line of defence for our country," Air Commodore K.K. Vijay Kumar, in charge of the fleet in the islands, said.

The armed forces plan to set up new bases in Port Blair and Diglipur, both in the northern part of the islands, to thwart possible military incursions and conduct major defence reconstruction work.

"One must understand that the nearest land of the country from where help can arrive in a crisis is either Calcutta, Visakhapatnam or Chennai, which are all at an average 1,250 km away. So the islands must have stronger capabilities to tackle any eventuality," Kumar added.

Land is being acquired on the west coast of Car Nicobar and a complete overhauling will be undertaken in Campbell Bay to strengthen the forward operating posts (military supplies depot) on the only inhabited island in the south.

and 45 acres in Calicut. Once the land is ready, the armed forces will be in a better situation to deal with any eventuality, be it war with the enemy or against nature," Kumar said.

Plans are also afoot to build a strategic "operation readiness platform" in Port Blair, where a pilot will take only three minutes to get on the aircraft and be airborne once the bell rings. "The alertness shown by our navy, army and air force has been exemplary and it is time to improve our capabilities further," said Wing Commander S.N. Mukherjee.

About 3,000 feet of the 9,000-ft runway on Car Nicobar island has been destroyed by the tsunami.

Several islands in the extreme south, including Chowra, Trinkat, Pillowmillow, Konda, Bompoka, Tillanchang and Little Nicobar, have been completely evacuated. In this situation, opening new bases in the north, towards Coco Islands, and strengthening the old ones with new technology is the only option left, feel experts.

Land is being acquired on the west coast of Car Nicobar and a complete overhauling will be undertaken in Campbell Bay to strengthen the forward operating posts (military supplies depot) on the only inhabited island in the south.

Military sets sights on tsunami-proof bases

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