

Local action 'key in tsunami aid'

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A year on from the Asian tsunami, there are calls for greater efforts to help vulnerable areas prepare for disasters.

The Fritz Institute in the United States says donor groups and governments should work more closely with the private sector.

Meanwhile, in those countries recovering from the tsunami, people are preparing for ceremonies to mark the first anniversary of the tragedy.

The waves that struck a year ago on Monday killed more than 200,000 people.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse was due to lead a tribute in the southern village of Peraliya, where nearly 2,000 people died when a train was swept off the tracks by the huge waves.

They were among more than 31,000 people to die across the country.

After a two-minute silence at 0930 (0330 GMT), the time when the tsunami struck, the president was to unveil a monument for the victims.

Counsellors

Sri Lanka has been praised for the progress it has made since the disaster.

"Much has been achieved this year," a statement from UN and other agencies said.

It said almost 250,000 internally displaced people had been moved from



emergency camps to some 54,000 transitional shelters.

It also praised the increasing pace of "the reconstruction of permanent housing".

But the Fritz Institute, which has carried out a large-scale survey of the views of the tsunami survivors, says the role played by local communities in the aftermath of such a disaster has been underestimated.

In Indonesia, it says, 91% of the rescue services were provided by private individuals.

"The government, corporations, international NGOs, local NGOs, and religious organisations were practically absent in comparison," it said.

It calls for much more investment in local facilities - not just for the more obvious requirements like warehousing, but also for having trained counsellors on hand too.

'Bounce back'

Anniversary ceremonies are already under way in Thailand, where Buddhist and Christian memorials drew hundreds of people to the affect-

ed beaches along the west coast.

"We wanted to come here to remember those who died," said 17-year-old Joann Johnson, an English teacher from New York, at a Buddhist temple ceremony at Wat Ban Muang on the Khao Lak coast.

Thailand's official death toll stands at 5,395.

In Indonesia, the worst-hit country, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono attended a Christmas service on the mainly Christian island of Nias, which also suffered an earthquake in March that killed 900 people.

The president, joining around 6,000 people at the service on a football field, expressed "empathy to the people of Nias and southern Nias who have suffered because of the earthquake and the tsunami.

"With the spirit of Christmas, it is my hope that the people of Nias can bounce back and further build Nias," he said.