

Pledge to UN tsunami warning fund honored

By Megan Cossey

Yesterday Thailand became the first country to donate to a United Nations-administered trust that aims to establish a regional tsunami alarm system. Foreign Minister Kantathi Suphanongkhon yesterday delivered on the government's nine-month-old promise to provide US\$10 million in seed money.

The wait for the money was riddled with bureaucratic negotiations between the government and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. As the UN-organized program was delayed, various regional governments and disaster experts worked behind the scenes to have a warning system up and running by the one-year anniversary of last December's tsunami.

One of these began last April, when the Thailand-based Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) started quietly approaching governments and donor agencies for money to install tsunami warning devices in the Indian Ocean and train the people needed to effectively run the system.

A grant from a different UN agency, the United Nations Development Program, enabled the center to purchase and install two satellite-linked tidal level gauges along Thailand's Andaman coast, said Suvit Yodmani, ADPC's executive director.

Those two gauges, which cost \$75,000 each, will be operational within a month, he said. However, their proximity to Thailand's shores limits their effectiveness because people will not have enough time to evacuate by the time the gauges detect a tsunami.

ADPC and Thailand's own National Disaster Warning Center had hoped to install tidal level gauges at crucial points along India's Nicobar and Andaman islands but, according to Kantathi, India has yet to respond to Thailand's request.

ADPC asked the government of Myanmar to install the gauges in its waters; permission was granted earlier this month. This should give Thailand at least an hour's warning in the event of another large tsunami.

Sweden, Denmark and the United Kingdom have all signed on as donors to the ADPC project.