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Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNITED NATIONS ASSESSMENT TEAM TO OFFER SUPPORT
FOLLOWING SUMATRA EARTHQUAKE**

(New York, 12 September 2007): Early Thursday morning, a United Nations assessment team will fly to Bengkulu from Aceh with humanitarian supplies, following Wednesday evening's 8.4 magnitude earthquake, which occurred 105 kilometres off the southern coast of Sumatra, Indonesia. The United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team for the Asia-Pacific is also ready to travel to the area, if necessary. The quake – which rocked the provinces of Jambi, Riau, Bengkulu and West Sumatra, and the Indonesian capital, Jakarta – has killed at least 7 people so far, and has led to the collapse of at least one large building in Bengkulu.

“This earthquake is one of the biggest Sumatra has seen since 2005, and raises old fears in a country that had suffered tremendously from the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami already,” said John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. “Mindful of the extensive damage done to parts of Indonesia less than three years ago, the United Nations stands ready to provide any assistance the Government may require.”

The earthquake, which was followed by several strong aftershocks, had generated concerns of a tsunami harking back to that of 2004. In the city of Padang, the capital of West Sumatra province, thousands of residents remained on high ground following a tsunami warning. Those residing on the Mentawi Islands, located off the coast of Sumatra just north of the epicentre, are reported to have fled to higher ground and had set up tents in the hills. Two hours later, however, those alerts were called off when it became clear that there was no major tsunami.

Similar precautions were taken by Governments as far away as India and Sri Lanka, across the Indian Ocean from Indonesia, where residents were told to evacuate from low-lying areas. India issued a tsunami warning for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and began moving people in Tamil Nadu state to higher ground. Sri Lankan authorities moved people away from its east and southern coastline following a similar alert. Those alerts were eventually withdrawn.

President Yudhoyono instructed Indonesia's Coordinating Ministry for Emergency Response, the national police and the Indonesian army to conduct search-and-rescue operations in the earthquake-affected regions, and to assess the needs of displaced persons. The Indonesian Department of Social Affairs will send a search and rescue team, along with medical teams, specifically to Bengkulu, which experienced a devastating earthquake seven years ago that damaged more than 40,000 buildings. The Indonesian Air Force has two aircraft standing by for medical evacuations.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Indonesia is supporting the Government's disaster response agency in responding to the quake. The OCHA Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, in Bangkok, has alerted members of its staff for possible deployment to Indonesia. Three staff members of the United Nations partner organization Télécom Sans Frontières – the telecommunications “first responder” in emergencies – stand ready to set up communications centres in support of the Government, if called for.

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