



Powerful quake strikes Indonesia

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A massive earthquake has struck the Indonesian island of Sumatra, with officials saying it could have killed thousands of people as buildings collapsed.

At least 75 people were confirmed dead after hospitals and hotels crumbled, and as fires raged in the coastal city of Padang, home to nearly a million people, in the wake of the 7.6-magnitude quake.

"People are trapped, hotels have collapsed, schools have collapsed, houses have collapsed and electricity has been cut off," Vice President Jusuf Kalla told reporters in Jakarta.

Health Ministry crisis centre head Rustam Pakaya told AFP that a major city hospital was among the many buildings that had buckled.

"Houses and buildings have collapsed, causing thousands of people to be trapped inside in the rubble," Pakaya said.

Rescue teams and doctors had been rushed overland and were expected to arrive in the city and nearby affected areas overnight, Pakaya added.

He said he expected the death toll to soar over 1,000 as rescuers reached the city, where communications and power had been cut off by the quake.

Three military transport planes had been prepared to deliver aid including tents, blankets and medicine, Disaster Management Agency spokesman Priyadi Kardono said.

"The effects of the earthquake could be as big as the Yogyakarta quake," he said, referring to a 2006 quake that killed 6,000.

Local media reported that panicked residents rushed from their homes during the quake, which struck off Sumatra's west coast at 5:16 pm (AEST 20:16), 47 kilometres northwest of Padang.

The quake was followed by dozens of aftershocks, two of which were over 6.0-magnitude, Indonesian geophysics agency technical head Suharjono said, adding that damage was expected to be spread over a wide area.

The US Geological Survey (USGS) had put the quake at a magnitude of 7.9, but later revised it down slightly.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre in Hawaii initially put out a tsunami watch after the quake but later withdrew it.

The quake was felt in the capital Jakarta, 940 kilometres away, and sent frightened office workers streaming out of buildings in nearby Singapore and the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur.

"The shaking was the worst I had ever felt," Yuliarni, a resident of Pariaman district outside Padang, told TVOne news channel.

"Houses have collapsed, the lights and electricity were cut off... People were fleeing to higher ground and some were hurt," she said.

The quake caused a landslide that destroyed houses at Lake Maninjau, inland from Padang, local resident Hafiz told the channel, while the city airport was slightly damaged but was expected to reopen early Thursday.

Geologists said Padang, which lies near the colliding Indo-Australian and Eurasian tectonic plates, was vulnerable to more quakes and tsunamis.

"There will be aftershocks but it's difficult to predict whether there will be a bigger quake," Geological Disaster Mitigation and Volcanology Centre head Surono told AFP.

"There are three big volcanoes in West Sumatra - Merapi, Talang and Tandikat. We fear that this quake might cause volcanic eruptions there," he said.

Experts have said the city is most at risk from a final segment along the zone shifting to unleash a massive amount of energy.

The zone's other segments have already cracked, including a large portion off Aceh, at the northern tip of Sumatra, which triggered the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that killed more than 220,000 people.

World Vision's Indonesian emergency head Jimmy Nadapdap said in a statement the charity would attempt to send out a disaster survey team to the affected area on Thursday morning.

"It is critical that we get people into the quake zone as soon as possible to find out what has happened," he said.

"If buildings have collapsed then people are likely to be in urgent need of food, water and especially shelter. The injured will also need medical assistance."

Indonesia's Welfare Minister Aburizal Bakrie said the government had released 100 billion rupiah (\$A11.93 million) in emergency aid to deal with the disaster, news website Okezone reported.

Indonesia sits on the Pacific Ring of Fire, where the meeting of continental plates causes high volcanic and seismic activity.

A quake on the main island of Java earlier this month killed 123 people.