UN put in charge of coordinating duelling offers for tsunami warning system

The United Nations was Thursday put in charge of sorting out differences among countries offering to build a tsunami early warning system after a flood of proposals in the wake of the Indian Ocean tragedy.

Salvano Briceno, head of the UN disaster reduction group, said a system to warn of giant waves in the Indian Ocean was still on track to be running in 12 to 18 months.

A draft of the common statement of the 150 countries meeting in Kobe, Japan agreed the United Nations "would integrate regional disaster reduction strategies."

But the draft called for two more meetings: one of ministers on January 28-29 on the tsunami-hit Thai island of Phuket to review the Kobe conference and one in Bonn in early 2006 to review implementation.

Germany, Japan, the United States and Australia have all offered to put their technology to use in the Indian Ocean after the waves smashed into 11 nations' coasts on December 26 killing nearly a quarter of a million people.

In addition to the four countries, which are the biggest donors to tsunami-hit countries, Briceno said offers at least to contribute to an early warning system had also come from India, China, France, Thailand and Indonesia.

"They all have capacities they want to make available," Briceno told reporters.
"So the idea is that we will assess with those affected countries and the donor countries the role with which each of them can play," he said.

He said millions of dollars in government contributions were being sent to UN agencies to start with implementation.

"We do believe in 12 to 18 months there should be a basic capacity" on a warning system, Briceno said.

Shuzen Tanigawa, Japan's senior vice foreign minister, indicated frustration and said Tokyo would press ahead with its system despite the calls for further talks.

"I think we are the most advanced (in tsunami warnings) so we don't have to wait," Tanigawa said.

"After the tsunami something has to be done and you can't wait until there is a consensus. So some part of it has to be started, and it has to be coordinated," he said.

A person privy to the closed-door talks described the atmosphere as heated with delegates carefully choosing every word in the declaration. Separately, a Japanese official said negotiators were still working on the document into Thursday evening.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies warned that the Kobe conference could end up failing in its target of reducing the risks of disasters.

"There is still time for a positive outcome but there is a very real danger that all we will get is rhetoric," said Eva Von Oelreich, the Federation's disaster preparedness head.

The five-day conference, which closes Saturday, has drawn some 4,500 experts and officials with half of them registering after the tsunamis.

The United States, which has rejected the Kyoto protocol on global warming, said it objected to "multiple references" to climate change in the documents.

Briceno said an agreement was reached to mention climate change only once.

He said the push to refer repeatedly to climate change had come "mostly from small island nations" which feel threatened by global warming and the resulting rise in water levels.

The conference here had opened with a call by UN relief chief Jan Egeland for greater commitment by donor nations to disaster prevention. Egeland on Thursday fell ill with a fever, an aide said.
Germany has said it will send satellite-equipped buoys to the Indian Ocean so its system could get off the ground immediately if accepted.

"The system is based on cutting-edge technology. It is fast, very precise and reliable," German delegate Hans-Joachim Daerr said.

The United States, by contrast, said the warning system should be "an expansion of the existing system in the Pacific," ambassador to Japan Howard Baker said.