

Needless tsunami deaths expose worldwide vulnerability and lack of US intervention

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The following commentary was submitted by World Socialist Web Site reader Christine Smith, a free-lance writer and social justice activist.

Why didn't the United States help Indian Ocean nations to have a tsunami warning system? Did our country attempt to notify those nations of a potential tsunami, and is America adequately protected? Here are findings from my interviews and research.

"What happened in the Indian Ocean was totally preventable," says Dr. Walter Dudley, professor of Oceanography, and chair of the Scientific Advisory Council for the Pacific Tsunami Museum. Prevention would have come at a cost of "probably what we spend on this war [in Iraq] in eight hours."

"There has been no major international effort, and I think that is really scandalous," said Dudley. "We're always talking about how inefficient the United Nations is, so if we really believe the UN is not the best place for this (and I'm not saying I take that position), but if that's what we believe, then we have to step up to the plate.... If we see ourselves as the world leader to provide freedom, well, these people have lost not only their freedom but their lives."

Sea floor gauges (like the six the United States has from the Aleutians down to Central America, and gauges off Chile and Japan) cost about a million dollars each, and must be combined with a communication and education program.

Barring a preventative scientific detection system, what could have been done to reduce loss of life?

Paul Earle, research geophysicist at the US Geological Survey (USGS), explained that the "call down list" was notified following the earthquake. "In about an hour and 15 minutes (from origin time of earthquake) we knew we had a preliminary magnitude of 8.5, and the State Department, White House, and relief organizations were notified," as well as 25,000

individuals worldwide on an e-mail list. Earle explained that the responsibility of the National Earthquake Information Center "is to detect and report earthquakes worldwide, not to report the potential for a tsunami."

An undersea earthquake of such great magnitude can trigger a tsunami (undersea earthquakes or landslides cause most tsunamis), though without gauges it cannot be determined if a tsunami has formed. The earthquake, one of the strongest in 40 years, posed no tsunami threat to Hawaii, to the West Coast of North America or to other Pacific Basin coasts. The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC) reportedly issued a bulletin identifying the possibility of a tsunami near the epicenter. Thus, the American government was notified of the massive earthquake, and the potential for formation of a devastating tsunami was known.

Based on that, the American government saw it prudent to notify the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia (location of a US Navy Base used for bombing raids on Afghanistan and Iraq). But did our government adequately attempt to notify other nations that were not a part of the Pacific Warning system?

The US State Department "declined" to answer my simple question as to whether they notified or attempted to notify anyone in the affected nations that a massive oceanic earthquake had occurred. Rather than receiving an interview (after supplying the State Dept. with my questions at the request of their Media Outreach Department), I was instead told the South Asian Bureau had said, "No one was available," and that the East Asian and Pacific Affairs Office had said, "We don't have anyone here for [her] to talk to," and that "We don't have the answers to these questions."

I was told the State Department would be glad to talk to me about their tsunami disaster relief efforts and how they were helping Americans to find their relatives, but

“no one was available” from the State Department to answer my question as to whether anyone in the State Dept. had attempted to notify the affected countries of the threat, and if so, to whom and when?

Anyone can within minutes access numerous telephone, fax, and e-mail contacts online from the affected nations; I am confident the US State Dept., CIA, Navy, and other governmental agencies have access to far better contacts than what can be found online. Yet, an individual, using the Internet, finds contacts for numerous government officials, hotels, resorts, and other official and private sector entities in the tsunami path.

But, as Dr. Dudley emphasizes, “You need an emergency protocol,” since just picking up the phone doesn’t necessarily result in reaching the right people or those who will heed the warning or know what to do unless they’ve been educated in advance.

But still the question begs, did the US government attempt to notify all the affected countries? It would then, of course, have then been up to those countries to warn their people or not—but at least we would have done something, given the circumstances, to try to prevent loss of life. Published reports indicate evacuation for many would simply have meant walking inland.

Dr. Dudley noted, “The effort should go now to set up a global system. We get floods in most states every single year and they kill two or three people. You get tornadoes...and they kill a dozen people, a hundred people, and it’s a tragedy. But it’s a natural phenomenon we know is going to happen and we have systems. Tsunamis are the same way.... They’ve happened throughout history, they will continue to happen. People think they’re not important because they are so rare. But the cost is so great when one does occur.”

Is America adequately protected? Though the West Coast has the sea gauges and some education programs, a tsunami could occur in the Atlantic as well. I believe possibility, not probability, should be the measure as to where technological and educational measures should be implemented (as the Indian Ocean tragedy proves).

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the NOAA National Weather Service began the voluntary TsunamiReady Community Program “to help areas prepare for such

events. To date, there are 10 communities in Alaska, Washington, Oregon and California that have met the TsunamiReady criteria.” Where does that leave the preparedness of the rest of America’s West Coast, much less the East Coast?

For example: A worst-case scenario by scientists Steven N. Ward (Institute of Geophysics and Planetary Physics, University of California, Santa Cruz) and Simon Day (Benfield Greig Hazard Research Center-Dept. of Geological Sciences, University College-London), reported in a 2001 paper in Geophysical Research Letters, regards the potential of a huge tsunami hitting America’s East Coast should the unstable Cumbre Vieja volcano on a Canary Island erupt causing its western flank to slide into the ocean. Though a sudden massive landslide and subsequent massive tsunami might not occur (and rather small chunks of land may slide into the sea), the possibility exists.

Dudley commends the people and work of the PTWC and the West Coast Alaska Regional Tsunami Warning Center but says, “Operationally, they could certainly use more funding...” and that “tsunami education has been done very, very piecemeal, very poorly funded.... Education and appreciation of the danger is critical to even make the technology end work.”



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