

Thirty-eight minutes of chaos

Patrick Martin
15 January 2018

A false report of an impending ballistic missile attack on Hawaii on Saturday sent more than one million people fleeing to shelter, with many believing they only had minutes to live before nuclear incineration. People sought refuge in highway tunnels, underground parking garages and basements, and even lowered their children into sewer manholes. There were harrowing conversations, as people made what they thought could be their final phone calls to loved ones.

The alert, issued by the state of Hawaii's Emergency Management Agency, delivered a stark message to most cell phones throughout the island chain: "Emergency Alert: BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL." The alert was immediately rebroadcast by local television and radio stations under longstanding arrangements that place the media at the service of the military in the event of war.

According to state officials, the alert was the result of an emergency worker pressing the wrong button during an exercise carried out regularly at every eight-hour shift change around the clock. The Trump administration downplayed the event as a "state exercise" that did not involve national military forces and the American media dismissed it as an accident.

The supposed accident is under investigation and it is highly unlikely that the actual details will ever be made public. But what is known already raises critical political issues.

If an emergency management technician pressed the wrong button, it is likely that he was dealing with new and unfamiliar equipment: the drill itself was put into practice only a few weeks ago. There have been feverish preparations by state officials for a possible nuclear missile strike on Hawaii as tensions have mounted between the Trump administration and North Korea. The state legislature last April called for the refurbishing of Cold War-era fallout shelters, and

Hawaii's air raid sirens were tested last month for the first time in 70-plus years.

Under other circumstances, the alert, which did not trigger emergency sirens, might have been immediately recognized as a mistake and shrugged off by the population. But not under today's conditions, following repeated threats by President Trump of "fire and fury" against North Korea and warnings that US territory, particularly the state of Hawaii, could be subjected to a North Korean nuclear attack.

Only last week, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, retired Admiral Michael Mullen, told a national television audience that the world was "closer, in my view, to a nuclear war with North Korea and in that region than we have ever been." Trump himself taunted North Korean leader Kim Jong-un about the size of his "nuclear button," boasting "it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"

When they received the state alert, residents of Hawaii assumed that the war threatened by Trump had actually begun.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the Hawaii event is the 38 minutes that passed between the initial alert, at 8:07 a.m. local time, and the official text message rescinding it.

According to the chronology of the event released by state officials, the US Pacific Command, which is headquartered at Pearl Harbor, notified the state emergency service at 8:10 a.m., only three minutes after the alert was issued, that there was no missile launch. The emergency agency passed on that reassurance immediately to the Honolulu Police Department. The agency canceled the alert at 8:13 a.m. and posted a notice to that effect on its public Facebook and Twitter accounts at 8:20 a.m. But no text message was sent out until 8:45 a.m. to the more than one million people who received the initial alert.

State officials have as yet given no reason for the delay. But one press account is suggestive. The *Los Angeles Times*, citing state emergency agency spokesman Richard Rapoza, wrote that “it took 38 minutes to cancel the alert because...the agency had to seek authorization from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to send out the all-clear and to use the civil alert system to send out the message that there had been a false alarm.”

This suggests that the federal government may have deliberately slowed down the rescinding of the alert, perhaps to use the occasion as a test of the public response to the potential disaster.

Not examined in any of the press coverage is the global impact of the Hawaii alert. What was the response in Russia, China and North Korea to the announcement—broadcast around the world—that a ballistic missile alert had been declared in an American state? Were there contacts between Washington, Beijing and Moscow? Were orders given to prepare for the anticipated American nuclear reprisal against Pyongyang? Were the nuclear forces of these countries readied for immediate action?

There are other questions. If such a “mistake” had taken place in the military command, rather than in the civilian emergency management agency, how long before US missiles would have been fired at North Korea in “retaliation” for the supposed attack on American soil? If a similar incident took place in Russia or North Korea, what would the US response be to such an alert?

The events in Hawaii show what the opening minutes of a nuclear war would look like. Despite all the bluster of the White House, the Pentagon and the media, the news that missiles were on the way would lead immediately to panic and a general breakdown of society. A country whose infrastructure cannot handle a snowstorm would hardly be able to cope with a nuclear attack.

Above all, the 38 minutes of terror in Hawaii prove that the danger of nuclear war is real and increasing. This danger is not merely the byproduct of the personal recklessness and chauvinistic militarism of President Trump. If Hillary Clinton had been elected in 2016, the location of the military crisis might be different—Syria or Ukraine perhaps, rather than North Korea—but the drive by US imperialism to offset its long-term

economic and strategic decline by resort to military force would remain.

It was President Obama who approved the ongoing \$1.3 trillion refurbishing of the US nuclear weapons arsenal, the most fearsome in the world. And the Democratic Party, focusing all its efforts on the anti-Russian campaign, is working to create the political climate for a US military clash with Moscow that would put a nuclear war immediately on the agenda.

January 13 in Hawaii is a major turning point. Whatever the assurances issued by the White House, or the media propaganda, people all over the world will see the question of war in a very different way. The urgent necessity is the building of a mass antiwar movement of the international working class, based on the understanding that the driving force of the war danger is the global crisis of capitalism. Only the abolition of the profit system and the establishment of a socialist society on a world scale can prevent a nuclear catastrophe.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)