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## EDITORIAL

# Tsunami scare showed calm under pressure

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When civil defense sirens roused Hawaii's people from Saturday-morning slumber, the threat of a potentially destructive tsunami was on its way. In an impressive response, Hawaii's scientists, government officials, first-responders, citizens and visitors showed an anxious nation that cooperation under duress is imperative -- and achievable.

The tsunami was generated by a magnitude 8.8 earthquake off Chile the night before, triggering a 12:46 a.m. Pacific-wide tsunami warning. Well before sunrise and the sirens, people were out gathering supplies, filling gas tanks and preparing to head for higher ground.

The wonders of science, information and technology gave Hawaii the gift of time: a full 14 hours to kick emergency evacuations and plans into gear before the tsunami's anticipated arrival.

Carrying out a civil-defense scenario well-rehearsed in periodic disaster drills, the governor was articulate on the game plan, as was Honolulu's acting mayor, other county mayors and civil defense leaders. By 10 a.m., an hour before the tsunami's initial impact at Hilo, normally-bustling sites were eerily empty: Waikiki beaches and streets, shopping centers, freeways and highways.

It was a dramatic contrast to the last tsunami warning in 1994, when confusion and weekday congestion created chaos, gridlock and criticism.

The media helped retain order and calm. News outlets informed about evacuation inundation zones, shelter assembly areas, event cancellations and generally reassured by keeping people connected. Friends and family, watching the breaking news from afar with local feeds on CNN and Fox News, called, twittered and e-mailed their concern.

Pacific Tsunami Warning Center scientists in Ewa Beach, led by director Charles "Chip" McCreery, were models of professionalism, breaking away periodically from critical data analyses to provide updates in laymen's terms, urging residents to "take this seriously."

Thanks to hindsight -- and the fact that the 3-foot tsunami surges ultimately caused no damage or


injury -- some will be tempted to question the extent and duration of Saturday's measures. But it would be foolish to have underestimated the destructive forces of nature. The tsunami-generating quake in Chile had already killed more than 145. And from 1900 through 1964, eight Pacific-wide tsunamis of at least 10 feet have hit Hawaii, including the 1960 tragedy that killed 61 people in Hilo triggered by a 9.5-magnitude quake off Chile.

As the tsunami warning lifted, officials and scientists acknowledged the inconvenience to citizens and expressed the importance of assessing how things went, to improve response in future disasters. That struck the right tone going forward.

It was a textbook evacuation, a model of coordination with an eye on the greater good. No panic, no balking. It is not a question of if, but when, disaster will end with a bang, not a whimper. Based on Saturday's reaction, it is reassuring that Hawaii's people will face it well: Calmly, coolly, collectively.

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