

## **Exercise Pacific Wave 06 seeks to consolidate tsunami warning system**

Paris, 15 May – The first-ever region-wide drill for the Pacific Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System will be carried out over the next two days, 16 and 17 May. Sponsored by UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC), the exercise, known as Pacific Wave 06, has taken on even greater importance following the major earthquake in the region earlier this month that highlighted the strengths and identified several weaknesses in the system.

“The earthquake on 4 May showed that we have greatly improved our capacity to get the initial information out quickly,” said Patricio Bernal, Executive Secretary of the UNESCO-Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC). “Information Bulletin 001 for this event was issued just 15 minutes after the earthquake. A few years ago this would have taken almost an hour.

“Likewise,” he continued, “when data showed that the magnitude of the earthquake was not as high as first estimates indicated and as sea-level stations confirmed that it had not produced a destructive tsunami, the System was able to cancel the warning much faster, thus avoiding much wider warning and possibly unnecessary evacuations. This rapidity is due largely to the real time availability of seismic and sea-level data from stations in the Pacific Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System's Member States.

“However, the event also highlighted the need to improve the Information Bulletins. These internal bulletins are now available to people outside the System, and must be able to be understood by all – whether scientist, journalist or layperson. There is also clearly a need for better public education on the way the system works, how it operates. On 4 May, there was no official warning issued by any national authority, the only ones mandated to do so. The Pacific Wave 06 exercise, which will be the first of its kind, is a very important part of this awareness raising.”

The simulation will be carried out in two stages, beginning with a mock tsunami warning bulletin from the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre in Hawaii on 16 May (17 May in the South-West Pacific). The bulletin will be transmitted to designated contact points and national emergency authorities responsible for tsunami response in each country. It will clearly indicate that it is a test as opposed to an actual warning.

In the second stage, which should be conducted on the same day or even extended to the following day, government officials will disseminate the message within the

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country to local emergency management and response authorities, simulating the chain of events that would happen in a real situation. Notifying and coordinating actions with authorities of at least one single coastal community is set as a sufficient measure for testing the end-to-end process of the entire country for the purposes of this first exercise. Although communication drills are frequent in the System, this is the first time that the drill will extend to the “last mile”, checking on the capability of national authorities to reach the people at risk.

“We should not lose sight of the fact that more tsunamis occur in the Pacific than in any other ocean. The recent earthquake in the region also served as a reminder of the vulnerability of small island states when natural disasters strike. It is therefore imperative that all nations in this region participate,” said UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura. “UNESCO is committed to helping countries to improve their warning capability. We are confident the results of this exercise will not only help to protect the public from future tsunamis, but will also serve as a testing model for other areas that could be impacted by these destructive waves.

There are 28 member countries in the UNESCO/IOC International Coordinating Group of the Pacific Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System (ICG/PTWS). Its secretariat is provided by the UNESCO-IOC International Tsunami Information Centre (ITIC), which also serves as the information and capacity building resource for the IOC’s tsunami programme. A task team chaired by Australia and including representatives from the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre, West Coast/Alaska Tsunami Warning Centre, Northwest Pacific Tsunami Advisory Centre, International Tsunami Information Centre, Australia, Chile, France, Fiji, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Russian Federation, Samoa and the USA, is coordinating the May 2006 exercise.

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More information from: <http://ioc3.unesco.org/ptws>, <http://ioc3.unesco.org/itic/>,  
<http://www.tsunamiwave.info>

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