

Pacific tsunami warning system put to the test

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27-04-2006 10:30 am The first-ever region-wide test of the Pacific Tsunami Warning System will be carried out over 16 and 17 May. Sponsored by UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) which established the system over 40 years ago, the exercise aims to increase preparedness, evaluate response capabilities in each country and improve coordination throughout the region. 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 May 16. 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 the following day, government officials will disseminate the message within the country to local emergency management and response authorities, simulating what would happen in a real situation. Notifying 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.

"To be effective, warning systems must maintain a high level of readiness," said UNESCO/IOC Executive Secretary Patricio Bernal. "This means emergency agencies should regularly practice their response procedures to ensure that vital communications links work seamlessly and that agencies and response personnel know the roles that they will need to play during an actual event.

UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura has urged all countries in the region to take part in the exercise, known as Exercise Pacific Wave '06.

"We should not lose sight of the fact that more tsunamis occur in the Pacific than in any other ocean. It is therefore imperative that all nations in this region participate," Mr Matsuura said. "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. Exercise Pacific Wave '06 is the first drill in a series of regular exercises. 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.