

TSUNAMI INTERNATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE – MAY 17, 2006

HEADLINES:

GENERAL:

AFP - SMS Glitch Mars Testing Of New Tsunami Warning System: Delayed SMS messages in Thailand marred Wednesday's otherwise successful trial of a regional tsunami warning system by dozens of countries across the Pacific. The exercise, code-named Pacific Wave '06, was initially declared a success by officials at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre in Hawaii, who said a series of earthquakes hitting the region for real had not disrupted the test. "If those events were large enough to cause a tsunami warning to be issued then we would have terminated the test at that point," duty geophysicist Stuart Koyanagi told AFP.

A magnitude 7.4 earthquake struck off the coast of New Zealand's Kermadec Islands late Tuesday, just hours before the test began, the US Geological Survey (USGS) reported. A 6.8 magnitude earthquake then struck near Indonesia's Nias island at 1528 GMT Tuesday and two temblors of magnitude 5.8 and 6.0 struck Tonga after the exercise began at 1900 GMT with a mock 9.2 quake off Chile, the USGS said.

ASSOCIATED PRESS ONLINE - Scientists Test Tsunami-Warning System: Dozens of Pacific-rim nations joined the first widespread test of a tsunami-warning system since killer waves in the Indian Ocean claimed more than 200,000. During the drill, earthquakes continued to shake the geologically unstable region. As the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Ewa Beach sent out bulletins warning of fictitious waves to more than 30 countries, participating governments tested how fast they receive the warnings and how rapidly they went through domestic emergency alert systems. Few reported problems, although Thailand officials said the drill revealed a crucial communication failure in their emergency plan. Tuesday's drill was the first extensive test of the warning system, in place since 1965, since the 2004 Asian tsunami that left at least 216,000 people dead or missing and prompted international demands for improvement.

REUTERS NEWS - Pacific Tsunami Warning Test Reveals Glitches: A Pacific-wide tsunami drill on Wednesday revealed glitches in the regional alert network ranging from a faulty fax machine in Malaysia to an overloaded telephone network in Thailand, officials said. To test how well countries and their people can be notified about possible tsunamis, Exercise Pacific Wave 2006 simulated two massive undersea earthquakes -- one off the coast of the Chile, the other north of the Philippines. "It was really a communications test for us," said Stuart Koyanagi, a geophysicist at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Hawaii, which coordinated the test. "For the most part, we were very pleased with the results, especially as it's the first time we've done this sort of thing," he said. "Tsunamis don't happen too often, so we have to keep people on their toes." For the Philippine quake, which primarily affected nations around the South China Sea, Japan's Meteorological Agency transmitted six dummy bulletins to 10 countries by fax, e-mail and a special weather-data communications system. "The last time there was one fax number in Malaysia that didn't receive the information, but that place received the information another way as well, so there was no big problem," said Osamu Kamigaichi, the agency's senior tsunami expert.

AFP - Spanish Design Picked For Thai Tsunami Memorial: A nature-conscious design by Spanish architects inspired by Buddhist pagodas was chosen Wednesday for a memorial to the 5,400 people killed when the 2004 tsunami hit Thailand. The team of

Ana Somoza Jimenez, Angel Martinez, Eva Sebastian Penin and Raquel Lozano created a design with five buildings that resemble Thai temples set in a garden that blends in with the surrounding mountains.

"It's a world-class design which we believe is a memorial to humanity's capacity for cooperation and assistance to cope with natural calamity," Suwat Liptapanlop, deputy prime minister told a news conference. "This place should serve as a memorial to all those who lost their loved ones," he said. The design was titled "Mountain of Remembrance", and it beat out four other finalists from Australia, China, Finland and the United States. In addition to the five main buildings, the memorial will include a hall of remembrance to the victims, a museum, a shop and a restaurant. It will also have one of the tsunami warning towers being built along the coast. The memorial will be built in part of the Khao Lak-Lamru national park on the coast in Phang Nga province, which suffered most of the casualties in Thailand.

INDONESIA:

Panic But No Damage After Quake Hits Indonesia's Nias: A strong quake with a magnitude of 6.4 rattled the Indonesian island of Nias, the meteorology office in Jakarta said Wednesday, causing mass panic among residents but no damage. The underwater quake hit at 10:28 pm (1528 GMT) Tuesday at a depth of 16 kilometres (9.94 miles), some 256 kilometres (159 miles) southwest of Sibolga on the Indonesian island of Sumatra, the office's Lukman Hakim told AFP. The US Geological Survey had earlier put the quake's magnitude at 6.8. Residents said that their houses shook and many of them fled for higher ground fearing a repeat of the devastating December 26, 2004 tsunami. "Lots ran to the mountain -- maybe 50 percent of people ran to the mountain," said Acen, a worker at the public hospital in Gunung Sitoli, the main town on Nias. "Some ran out of their houses and went to check the beach" for signs of a tsunami, he said. However he said there appeared to be no injuries reported from the quake and no reports of damaged buildings in the town. Nias was one of the areas hardest hit by the massive 2004 earthquake and subsequent tsunami that killed more than 220,000 people around the Indian Ocean, including 168,000 people in the Indonesian province of Aceh. That quake measured 9.3 on the Richter scale.

THAILAND:

AP - Thai Disaster Center Says Tsunami Warning Drill Exposes Communications Problem: A crucial link in the communications chain to alert top Thai emergency officials of possible tsunamis failed to work Wednesday during a simulation of a Pacific region-wide warning system, a disaster response official said. Messages from Thailand's National Disaster Warning Center sent by SMS to the country's five top emergency coordinators failed to reach their targets or were delayed for hours, said Dr. Cherdsak Virapat, the center's chief for International Coordination. According to Thailand's disaster preparedness plans, the center was then supposed to inform its five executive directors of the alert by SMS, before informing other officials including the prime minister and provincial governors. But the phone network used to send the SMS messages failed to deliver them immediately, he said. "We found some problems," Cherdsak told The Associated Press in a phone interview. "Today the mobile phone system run by one network has failed, so we got the message via another system." He said he would propose solutions to the problem for the Thai Cabinet's consideration next week. For a

real-life situation, alternative communication systems such as radio would be needed, he said.

FULL NEWS STORIES:
GENERAL:

SMS Glitch Mars Testing Of New Tsunami Warning System
May 17, 2006 Wednesday
Agence France Presse -- English

BANGKOK, May 17 2006- Delayed SMS messages in Thailand marred Wednesday's otherwise successful trial of a regional tsunami warning system by dozens of countries across the Pacific.

The exercise, code-named Pacific Wave '06, was initially declared a success by officials at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre in Hawaii, who said a series of earthquakes hitting the region for real had not disrupted the test.

"If those events were large enough to cause a tsunami warning to be issued then we would have terminated the test at that point," duty geophysicist Stuart Koyanagi told AFP.

A magnitude 7.4 earthquake struck off the coast of New Zealand's Kermadec Islands late Tuesday, just hours before the test began, the US Geological Survey (USGS) reported.

A 6.8 magnitude earthquake then struck near Indonesia's Nias island at 1528 GMT Tuesday and two temblors of magnitude 5.8 and 6.0 struck Tonga after the exercise began at 1900 GMT with a mock 9.2 quake off Chile, the USGS said.

The warning centre in Hawaii, which launched the test exercise for more than 30 countries, said none of the earthquakes triggered genuine Pacific-wide tsunami warnings, but the two biggest could cause small local tsunamis.

There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage from the earthquake zones.

Of more concern to test organisers was news later that plans to alert emergency coordinators to tsunami threats failed to work in Thailand when busy cell phone networks took hours to deliver key messages.

"The problem we faced was with communications. We have no idea whether our messages sent to local operations chiefs by fax and SMS arrived on time or not, and by midday some of them said they did not receive the SMS," Pakdivat Vajirapanlop from the National Disaster Warning Center told AFP.

"We need to know whether they have received our messages. What can they do if the messages don't arrive on time? Then the warning is useless," said Pakdivat, the center's deputy operations chief.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning System (PTWS) test was part of an effort to strengthen defences following the December 26, 2004 killer waves that swept across countries in the northern Indian Ocean, killing around 220,000 people.

Koyanagi, speaking before news of the warning delays in Thailand, admitted there were some areas where communications would need to be improved.

This mainly involved small island nations in the South Pacific, where communication systems were not well developed.

"I think for the first test there may have been a few that we had difficulty getting through to.

"The fact that the test ran for a pretty long period of time allowed us to backtrack and eventually get hold of just about everybody," he said.

The exercise began with a mock alert about the quake off the coast of Chile, which theoretically sparked a tsunami across the eastern Pacific. The second phase of the test involved a fake quake north of the Philippines.

Some countries, including the Philippines and Malaysia, staged partial evacuations as part of the exercise.

In the Philippines, civil defense officials evacuated the coastal village of Buhatan in the Bicol peninsula, 340 kilometers (212 miles) southeast of Manila, early Wednesday, taking all 1,143 residents to higher ground.

The drill took place before the simulated tsunami from the Chile quake was due to reach the shores of the western Pacific, the government seismology office said.

The alert message was successfully passed from regional to provincial to local officials, seismologist Esmeralda Banganan of the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology told AFP.

In New Zealand, where false media reports of a tsunami caused panic earlier this month, officials spent the day in the crisis management centre beneath parliament.

"The major lessons learnt today are not about process, they have been about management decisions," the director of the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management John Norton said.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning System has been in existence for more than 40 years, but exercises have until now only been conducted at national or local level.

The PTWS comes under the aegis of UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, which last year also set down the foundations for a tsunami early warning system in the Indian Ocean.

Scientists Test Tsunami-Warning System

By JAYMES SONG, Associated Press Writer

May 17, 2006 Wednesday 10:32 AM GMT
Associated Press Online

EWA BEACH Hawaii- Dozens of Pacific-rim nations joined the first widespread test of a tsunami-warning system since killer waves in the Indian Ocean claimed more than 200,000. During the drill, earthquakes continued to shake the geologically unstable region.

As the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Ewa Beach sent out bulletins warning of fictitious waves to more than 30 countries, participating governments tested how fast they receive the warnings and how rapidly they went through domestic emergency alert systems. Few reported problems, although Thailand officials said the drill revealed a crucial communication failure in their emergency plan.

Tuesday's drill was the first extensive test of the warning system, in place since 1965, since the 2004 Asian tsunami that left at least 216,000 people dead or missing and prompted international demands for improvement.

Some areas also conducted mock evacuations, including the coastal village of Buhatan in the Philippines, where nearly 1,000 residents streamed out of their homes, tugging children and struggling to carry bamboo mats, hammocks, coffee pots and roosters.

Several real earthquakes hit Indonesia, Tonga and New Zealand during the exercise. The largest, centered about 710 miles northeast of Auckland, New Zealand, generated a minor local tsunami that did not affect any populated areas, New Zealand national civil defense controller Mike O'Leary said. It did not affect the drill.

A magnitude-5.8 earthquake rattled Tonga as emergency authorities were broadcasting the simulated earthquake alerts. The National Disaster Office was "bombarded with questions" as the quake hit in the midst of the tsunami test, deputy director Mali'u Takai said.

At the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center, the test began with a beeping sound signaling a mock magnitude 9.2 earthquake off the coast of Chile. Within 10 minutes, test warnings went out from the Hawaii facility, as well as the Alaska Tsunami Warning Center near Anchorage.

It was the first of nine bulletins issued throughout the day, warning of a fictitious wave that grew to as big as 30 feet. Tsunamis generally travel at the speed of a commercial jet, but the center increased the speed four times, for the drill to finish in six hours.

The drill revealed communication problems in Thailand, where the National Disaster Warning Center was supposed to inform its five executive directors of the alert by SMS before informing other officials including the prime minister and provincial governors

But the SMS messages failed to reach the five directors or were delayed for hours, said Dr. Cherdasak Virapat, the center's chief for International Coordination. Alternate communications systems would be needed for a real disaster, he said.

In Melbourne, Australia, Chris Ryan of the National Meteorological and Oceanographic Centre said that except for some wrong numbers and the real earthquakes, "it all seems to have gone as planned."

Emergency responders in Hawaii tested their ability Tuesday to deal with an unlikely scenario: a category four hurricane and a 30-foot tsunami approaching the islands at the same time.

"Theoretically, it's possible that you could have two disasters at the same time," state Civil Defense spokesman Ray Lovell said. "We might as well see how well we can handle this."

The Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004 prompted improvements in the Pacific warning system. Other countries, including Indonesia and nations in the Caribbean, are now spending millions of dollars to establish their own warning centers modeled after the Hawaii facility.

Prior to the Asian disaster, worldwide interest in tsunami warnings had waned.

"So this was a golden opportunity to try and bring that level of preparedness back up," said Charles McCreery, director of the warning center.

Associated Press writer Ray Lilley in Wellington, New Zealand, contributed to this report.

On the Net:

International Tsunami Information Centre: <http://www.tsunamiwave.org/>

Pacific Tsunami Warning Test Reveals Glitches

By Ed Cropley

May 17, 2006 Wednesday

Reuters News

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To test how well countries and their people can be notified about possible tsunamis, Exercise Pacific Wave 2006 simulated two massive undersea earthquakes -- one off the coast of the Chile, the other north of the Philippines.

"It was really a communications test for us," said Stuart Koyanagi, a geophysicist at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Hawaii, which coordinated the test.

"For the most part, we were very pleased with the results, especially as it's the first time we've done this sort of thing," he said. "Tsunamis don't happen too often, so we have to keep people on their toes."

For the Philippine quake, which primarily affected nations around the South China Sea, Japan's Meteorological Agency transmitted six dummy bulletins to 10 countries by fax, e-mail and a special weather-data communications system.

"The last time there was one fax number in Malaysia that didn't receive the information, but that place received the information another way as well, so there was no big problem," said Osamu Kamigaichi, the agency's senior tsunami expert.

"The results were basically as we expected, although we thought that we'd succeed with every place every time."

In Thailand, where more than 5,000 people died in the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the government heard the message fine but a plan to issue a public alert by text message failed as phone networks ground to a halt.

Deputy Prime Minister Suwat Liptapanlop and a string of high-ranking officials presiding over the drill were left red faced as SMS alerts limped in as much as 15 minutes late.

"This is something we need to improve, otherwise it may cause great damage," Samith Dhammasaroj, head of the Thai Tsunami Warning Research Centre, told Reuters. "If we get the alerts late, the people in charge cannot issue evacuation orders."

There was better luck in the Philippines, where officials staged an evacuation drill in the remote coastal village of Buhatan, 340 km (200 miles) south-east of the capital Manila, to test residents' response time to a phone alert.

Sandwiched between Albay Gulf and the Philippine Sea, the village is often hit by typhoons and even ashfalls from the nearby Mayon Volcano, but before the exercise residents said they had no idea how to survive a killer wave.

In the run-up to the drill, provincial officials launched an aggressive public education campaign, including installing metal signs beside roads pointing the way to higher ground.

Renato Sulidum, director of the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology, said nearly all those involved in the drill made it to safety in time. Only those who were sick or who had recently given birth stayed behind, he said. (Additional reporting by Elaine Lies in TOKYO, Karishma Vyas in MANILA and Panarat Thepgumpanat in BANGKOK)

INDONESIA:

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"Lots ran to the mountain -- maybe 50 percent of people ran to the mountain," said Acen, a worker at the public hospital in Gunung Sitoli, the main town on Nias.

"Some ran out of their houses and went to check the beach" for signs of a tsunami, he said.

However he said there appeared to be no injuries reported from the quake and no reports of damaged buildings in the town.

Nias was one of the areas hardest hit by the massive 2004 earthquake and subsequent tsunami that killed more than 220,000 people around the Indian Ocean, including 168,000 people in the Indonesian province of Aceh.

That quake measured 9.3 on the Richter scale.

Three months later, Nias was struck by an 8.7-magnitude quake, which killed 850 people, injured 6,000 and left tens of thousands homeless.

Indonesia sits on the Pacific "Ring of Fire", where the meeting of continental plates causes frequent seismic activity.

A geographical faultline runs parallel to the Indonesian island of Sumatra and tectonic activities along it have repeatedly led to strong earthquakes.

THAILAND:

Thai Disaster Center Says Tsunami Warning Drill Exposes Communications Problem
By GRANT PECK, Associated Press Writer

May 17, 2006 Wednesday
Associated Press Worldstream

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According to Thailand's disaster preparedness plans, the center was then supposed to inform its five executive directors of the alert by SMS, before informing other officials including the prime minister and provincial governors.

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"We found some problems," Cherdasak told The Associated Press in a phone interview. "Today the mobile phone system run by one network has failed, so we got the message via another system."

He said he would propose solutions to the problem for the Thai Cabinet's consideration next week.

For a real-life situation, alternative communication systems such as radio would be needed, he said.

The drill showed other weaknesses in the communication involving dependence on telephones, he added, saying that greater use of two-way radios was needed for tasks such as following the progress of evacuations.

At the same time, relevant agencies each had their open communications systems, which needed to be linked to each other, he said.

Faxed bulletins were received in timely fashion by the center from tsunami warning stations in Hawaii and Japan. Evacuation drills involving a total of 4,000 people in two seaside districts went well, according to Cherdasak, who said the exercise cost Thailand 2.6 million baht (US\$68,700, euro53,300).

Thailand was among more than two dozen Pacific and Asian nations countries participating in the first region-wide tsunami warning drill, conducted under the name "Pacific Wave '06," by the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, a U.N. agency.

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