

UNESCO Member States in the Pacific will stage tsunami drill

More than 20 countries* around the Pacific Rim will participate in a pre-arranged tsunami scenario from 28 to 30 October. Testing the UNESCO-initiated Pacific Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System (PTWS), the drill aims to evaluate the system, increase preparedness and improve coordination throughout the region.

“Exercise Pacific Wave 08” will simulate a Tsunami Warning situation, requiring countries to make decisions and take all preliminary steps short of alerting the public.

According to the scenario, a powerful earthquake located off Japan’s northeast coast will generate the simulated major tsunami. It will spread in real time across the entire Pacific, taking approximately 24 hours to travel from Japan to the coast of South America. Bulletins will be issued by the Northwest Pacific Tsunami Advisory Center (NWPTAC) in Tokyo, Japan, the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC) in Hawaii, USA, and the West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center (WCATWC) in Alaska, USA, and sent to focal points responsible for tsunami response in the countries concerned. Although a real-life tsunami would likely affect only a subset of countries in the region, all have been encouraged to take part.

The test will not involve populations but will review current warning system procedures and help identify operational strengths and weaknesses in each country. The Indian Ocean tsunami disaster in December 2004 provided a cruel reminder of the need to be prepared for these infrequent but potentially devastating hazards, particularly in the Pacific where destructive tsunamis occur most frequently. This month’s test will be the second such exercise; the first was conducted in May 2006.

The drill was recommended by Member States attending the 22nd session of the

Intergovernmental Coordination Group for the Pacific Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System (ICG/PTWS) held in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in October 2007. The ICG/PTWS was established by UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) in 1965, to promote exchange of seismic and sea level data for rapid tsunami detection, to provide warnings and to coordinate mitigation efforts among Member States.

After the 2004 tsunami, the IOC received the mandate to help UNESCO Member States of the Indian Ocean rim set up their own Tsunami Early Warning System (IOTWS). At the same time IOC began coordinating the creation of similar systems in the Caribbean (CARIBE-EWS) and the Mediterranean and Northeast Atlantic Ocean and connected Seas (NEAMTWS).

** Countries include Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Cook Islands, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, France, (French Polynesia and New Caledonia), Nicaragua, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Niue, Peru, Russian Federation, Samoa, Singapore, Republic of Korea, Thailand and the United States. The island of Yap, Federated States of Micronesia, will also participate.*

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