

Full-scale simulated tsunami alert in Caribbean

Paris, 17 March – Following the devastating tsunami that struck Japan, 33 countries* are preparing to participate on 23 March in the first full-scale simulated tsunami alert exercise in the Caribbean. The goal is to test the Tsunami and other Coastal Hazards Warning System for the Caribbean and Adjacent Regions, which was established in 2005 by the countries of the region in collaboration with UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC).

According to the scenario developed by the organizers** of the exercise, countries in the Caribbean will receive an alert on 23 March concerning a fictitious earthquake of 7.6 magnitude off the coast of the American Virgin Islands. Bulletins will be issued by the West Coast/Alaska Tsunami Warning Center (United States) for Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, and by the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC) in Ewa Beach (Hawaii, US) for the rest of the area.

The exercise, named Caribe Wave 11, does not involve communities. It aims to test the effectiveness of alert, monitoring and warning systems among all the emergency management organizations (national focal points for tsunami alerts, weather forecast offices, national coast guard, etc.) throughout the region. The test is designed to determine whether Caribbean countries are ready to respond in the event of a dangerous tsunami.

Previous experience underlines the crucial importance of rapid transmission of information. It has also shown that national authorities must take risk into account at all levels, including education about hazards in schools, urban planning in coastal zones, modification of building codes and materials, evacuation plans for communities and organization of effective emergency services.

“The earthquake and tsunami that have devastated Japan have shown how essential alert systems are,” said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova. “In this context the development of a coordinated system in the Caribbean is more relevant than ever, enabling coastal countries to prepare in the event of such a disaster and to save human lives.”

Over the last 500 years, 75 tsunamis have occurred in the Caribbean. This figure represents about 10% of the entire number of oceanic tsunamis in the world during that period. Tsunamis – caused by earthquakes or landslides, or of volcanic origin – have killed more than 3500 people in the region since the mid-19th century (source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NOAA). In recent decades, an explosion in population growth and the number of tourists in coastal areas have further increased the region's vulnerability.

Simulated tsunami exercises have been organized previously in the Pacific in 2008 and in the Indian Ocean in 2009. The Intergovernmental Coordination Group of the Tsunami and other Coastal Hazards Warning System for the Caribbean and Adjacent Regions (ICG/CARIBE EWS) was established in 2005, replicating the model of the Pacific, Indian Ocean and Northeast Atlantic systems. Created under the banner of the IOC, the ICGs support Member States in implementing Tsunami Early Warning Systems.

*Aruba, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, France (Martinique, Guadeloupe, St Martin, Guyane), Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Netherlands (Bonaire, Saba, Sint Eustatius, Curacao and Sint Marteen), Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Sri Lanka, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom (Anguilla, British Virgin Islands, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Montserrat, Turks and Caicos), United States

**Intergovernmental Coordination Group for Tsunami and Other Coastal Hazards Warning System for the Caribbean and Adjacent Regions, the Caribbean Emergency Management Agency, the Centro de Coordinación para la Prevención de los Desastres Naturales en América Central, NOAA, and the U.S. National Tsunami Hazard Mitigation Program (NTHMP) are providing the framework for this exercise.

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