

# TSUNAMI CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE CARIBBEAN



[ST THOMAS, VIRGIN ISLANDS] As soon as I arrived at last week's meeting on tsunami science here in the Caribbean, I encountered two delegates who shared a worrying rumour with me: "Somebody knows something about a tsunami that's coming soon."

That's the way rumors work: with ill-defined but arresting claims like this one. As usual, the rumour is based on a (distorted) reality. The last major tsunami in the Caribbean hit in 1918 — killing 40 people and causing US\$40 million worth of damage — and because the earthquakes that cause tsunamis sometimes adhere to decades-long cycles, some scientists here think that another one must be due.

It appears that some scientists at the meeting — the Ninth Session of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission Intergovernmental Coordination Group for the Tsunami and other Coastal Hazards Warning System for the Caribbean and Adjacent Regions, (held between 13-15 May) — believed other scientists have become aware of an impending tsunami risk, but aren't telling anyone about it.

Scientists and officials at the meeting have heard the poorly defined rumour and are trying to deal with it in a smart way.

For instance, in February 2013 representatives from the Puerto Rico Seismic Network visited homes in towns across several Caribbean islands, including Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic in order to explain to people what to do if a tsunami alert is sounded. They started an information campaign in local media.

“We know that suddenly talking about tsunamis alarms people and they can suspect we’re hiding something. On some occasions, they think it is related to secret nuclear tests — which is obviously false,” said Víctor Huérfano, the network’s interim director.

“With media campaigns such as the ones we’ve carried out, people can get scared,” he said, which is why going door to door to and talking to people, explaining the situation properly is important.

Meanwhile, Bernardo Aliaga, a tsunami expert with UNESCO’s International Oceanographic Commission, told me that “there is no hidden information, and cannot be, because scientists themselves do not agree on how and when a tsunami strikes”.

According to Aliaga, this feeling about a scientific conspiracy among some here in the Caribbean may have been created partly because people simply don’t believe that a tsunami could happen in the Caribbean. Because they happen so infrequently, there have been no accounts of them passed down between generations, he said.

But like the earthquakes that cause them, tsunamis are spaced over long intervals, he said. “The big one that hit Japan in 2011 was an 800-year cycle, and the one in Chile in 1960, a 300-year cycle,” said Aliaga. This is why it is crucial to educate people about this, he added.

But far from being a conspiracy theory, the message I took from the conference was that tsunamis could indeed pose a threat to the region.

The chair of the meeting, UNESCO’s Christa von Hillebrand-Andrade, told me that the real danger of a tsunami in the Caribbean has been overlooked by scientists.

“History has told us that this place has suffered 75 tsunamis in 500 years, so there is a latent hazard we have to be prepared to deal with,” she said.

Source : <http://www.scidev.net/global/disasters/scidev-net-at-large/tsunami-conspiracy-caribbean.html>