

TOURISM MEETS TSUNAMI PREPAREDNESS IN THE CARIBBEAN



[ST THOMAS, VIRGIN ISLANDS] Scaring away tourists is perhaps not such a good idea if you are in a country whose economy relies on its wonderful beaches. So, you must have a really good argument to alert everyone about a “new” hazard.

The people working on tsunami alerts in the Caribbean region know a big disaster is not very likely here. But the Indonesian tragedy of 2004 is always in the back of people’s minds.

Still, when hotel owners and managers heard about giving tourists notice of tsunami possibility, they panicked — at least for a while.

Claudio Martínez, from the tsunami alert unit of the national meteorology office of Dominican Republic, told me last week at the Ninth Session of the Intergovernmental Coordination Group for the Tsunami and Other Coastal Hazards Warning System for the Caribbean and Adjacent Regions, that his team has encountered some resistance from the hotel owners at their main tourist resort, Punta Cana.

“They at first refused to accept us because they believed they would lose tourism,”

he said.

Things have changed when the Funglode Foundation, a think-tank focusing on Dominican Republic development policy, and UNESCO organised meetings between a range of experts and tourism professionals in July 2013.

Hotel keepers in another two tourist area in the republic — Puerto Plata and Bayahibe — were more receptive to the idea of informing their customers about tsunami risks. “We did seminars, and created working groups; we now make evacuation maps, and street and beach signs, and we plan to put some sirens up eventually,” Martinez said.

A similar challenge faced Carolina Hincapié-Cárdenas, from the Puerto Rico Seismic Network.

“One hotel manager told me that tourists already have too many worries for him to add another one. Moreover, if it is a warning about dying, it will mess up their holidays,” she said to me.

Nevertheless, it was not the only response she had. “The security head at one hotel in Río Grande, Gran Meliá, was very interested in being ready for a tsunami. And he has a reason: the hotel is in a peninsula and a tsunami could sweep them off completely. They would have to walk a long distance in case of an emergency”, she added.

As part of the network’s tsunami program they also distributed flyers, put up signs, organized information meetings and trained staff in hotels.

Meanwhile, across the sea on the Virgin Islands, it’s been a different experience.

As Elton Lewis, from the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency told me, their biggest preoccupation — he refused to use the word “resistance”— comes from the local Historical preservation commission.

“They complained because of the size of the street signs we liked to put in historical zones. 'Very big', they said. Finally, they won the dispute and we had to reduce them and that was expensive,” he said.

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