

# Blame who for the Tsunami Disaster?

by Ilan Kelman

Following the 26 December 2004 tsunamis around the Indian Ocean, much attention focused on the scientists at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC) in Hawaii. Questions were asked about what they did and, in particular, did not do in order to warn countries that a tsunami was imminent. Their actions were disparaged as being too slow and too inadequate for the people who ultimately became victims. PTWC is blamed for the deaths of thousands. On behalf of several dozen survivors and next-of-kin, one lawyer has filed a class-action lawsuit against several defendants, including PTWC. The lawsuit is not yet seeking compensation, instead aiming to preserve and access material which could be used to prove negligence.

One of the first documents available must be PTWC's mandate, accessible to anyone at

<http://www.prh.noaa.gov/ptwc/aboutptwc.htm>: "The operational objective of the TWS [Tsunami Warning System] in the Pacific is to detect and locate major earthquakes in the Pacific region, to determine whether they have generated tsunamis, and to provide timely and effective tsunami information and warnings to the population of the Pacific to minimize the hazards of tsunamis, especially to human life and welfare. To achieve this objective, the TWS continuously monitors the seismic activity and ocean surface level of the Pacific Basin." The Indian Ocean is not, and never has been, part of PTWC's mandate. Perhaps the West Coast / Alaska Tsunami Warning Center, the Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk Tsunami Warning Center, the Japanese Meteorological Agency's tsunami warning system, the Puerto Rico Tsunami Warning and Mitigation Program, and others should be blamed and sued too. Furthermore, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission has promoted a Southwest Pacific and Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning System since at least 1997. No one would fund it. Dr. Tad Murty, a Canadian scientist originally from India, had tried for years to get India's government to set up a tsunami warning system. No one would fund it. A Central American Tsunami Warning System was proposed in 2003. No one would fund it. The Caribbean had developed a full plan for a Caribbean Tsunami Early Warning System and had costed it at only US\$2.426 million, stating in 2004 "The availability of funding will determine how quickly such a system can be implemented". No one would fund it. In 2004, Indonesia had decided to develop its National Tsunami Warning System. With the exception of the Islamic Development Bank, there was no rush of donors to assist.

A long history exists of governments

around the world having access to information about tsunami threats, having the processes, systems, technologies, and sociological knowledge available to create tsunami warning systems-and doing nothing. The Indian Ocean basin included.

Is it fair to blame PTWC for doing the job which they were specifically mandated to do rather than blaming the world for decades of inaction on a known problem?

In 1883, eruptions from the volcano Krakatoa, Indonesia generated tsunamis up to forty meters high (yes, 40) which killed tens of thousands of people, including around the Indian Ocean. In 1945, an earthquake off Pakistan's coast caused tsunamis which killed hundreds, many along India's west coast. A 1983 earthquake hit Diego Garcia with a 1.5 meter wave and the Seychelles with a 0.4 meter mini-tsunami. What other events are sitting

in the archives waiting to be discovered? Why did we fail to act on a known threat until after it has killed 300,000 people? Will the pattern ever stop of planning for the disaster which has already happened? Instead, we spend time criticizing scientists for acting in a manner entirely consistent with their job description. Within fifteen minutes of the 26 December earthquake, they were issuing bulletins--to Pacific countries, which is their job.

They were also working with the preliminary seismological data which suggested that the earthquake was less than one-tenth of the magnitude which has ultimately been agreed for it. Three days earlier, an earthquake more intense than the preliminary estimates for 26 December had rocked the ocean south of New Zealand. No major tsunami had resulted.

Even if PTWC had panicked about telling Indian Ocean countries about the possible threat, they had no authority to phone foreign governments and to order them to get their citizens away from the coastline. If they had nonetheless done so, would governments with no evacuation plan, minimal knowledge of tsunamis, and significant worry about their tourism industry have acted in a timely and appropriate manner? Would PTWC have been accused of engaging in last-minute blame shifting rather than tackling the problem's root causes?

The scientists were eventually in touch with the U.S. State Department and American embassies, saving lives in Kenya, Tanzania, and possibly a few other countries. If that was so important and so effective, why had the State Department not set up such protocols with PTWC long ago? If PTWC should have phoned Colombo, New Delhi, Dhaka, Yangon, Male, and Bangkok amongst others, why had those

governments or the State Department not already given PTWC the appropriate contact details? Why are highly specialized scientists in Hawaii expected to suddenly override long-standing political decisions by Washington, D.C. regarding disaster risk reduction, the sharing of scientific information, and foreign relations?

If the scientists had phoned other countries and no tsunami had ensued, an international diplomatic incident would have resulted. American imperialism! American conspiracy to bring down our tourist industry, our economy, and our government! Leave us alone, Yankee! PTWC would have been finished along with those scientists' careers. The Pacific would have been left as vulnerable to tsunamis as the Indian Ocean countries were.

The scientists had access to online news reports of the devastation in Indonesia and Thailand before India and Sri Lanka had been hit. So did we all. Anyone online had as much information as PTWC--and as much authority to inform governments. If they are to blame, then we all are, including people in the affected countries who were online at the time.

In January 2005, the Thai government fired the Director General of the Meteorological Department because his department had observed the 26 December earthquake but had failed to issue a tsunami warning. A hypocritical action considering that the replacement Director General was also the previous Director General who had been fired in 1998 for publicizing the tsunami threat facing Thailand. From Icelandic avalanches to Caribbean volcanoes, history is replete with examples of scientists being ostracized for issuing disaster warnings which were ignored but which later came true. Balancing this Cassandra complex are those who have been vilified for issuing warnings about events which did not happen.

If we expect to always have accurate, timely, credible warnings which people always obey with the correct actions, then we must invest in a long-term process combining science, technology, sociology, training, and education. Such education starts before kindergarten and continues beyond retirement. Disaster warnings cannot be made on a whim. Past ad hoc warnings have, overall, done more harm than good. Careful planning (requiring resources) would ensure that the appropriate systems (requiring resources) are in place for monitoring, analyzing, communicating, and acting.

The world has had ample opportunity to set up non-Pacific tsunami warning centers and systems. We had an immense amount of scientific information available, we had specific policy recommendations for tsunami

warning, and in the Caribbean we had a complete plan on paper.

Every single government with the resources to make it happen failed to act. Other priorities.

Too expensive. Not important. Scaremongering. Why give more aid to a corrupt regime? We want our taxes lowered and spent at home for us.

Now some of those taxes are going to government lawyers to defend PTWC for not taking responsibility for the world when they have specific instructions from the international community and their own government to stick to their region. Yes, a summer intern could have compiled phone numbers for the authorities around the Indian Ocean and around the world. Paid for by whom? What about all the tsunami work which still remains to be done in the Pacific, by PTWC interns and others? Should Pacific tsunami warning have suffered in order to encompass the Indian Ocean and other locations? A Pacific (Bismarck Sea) tsunami killed 3,000 people in Papua New Guinea on 17 July 1998.

The tsunami was mainly local and struck within minutes of the earthquake. Papua New Guinea was not and still is not part of the Pacific tsunami warning system. Should PTWC be blamed for this disaster too? Yes, the system has significant problems. Yes, the politics are aggravating and inhibit good work. Yes, we should have the authority and confidence in our jobs to stand up and leap out of our mandates without fear of punishment, even if we are wrong. Yes, hindsight illustrates that those scientists could have saved lives if they had acted differently on that day. But we and our governments could have saved even more lives if we had acted differently one year ago or ten years ago. And we and our governments know and knew a lot more than those scientists in Hawaii knew on that day. Let us stop blaming people faced with an impossible dilemma in a situation evolving as data were updated. They have saved thousands of lives and will continue to do so--but only within their mandate. To do more, they need resources and political support over the long-term.

"Instant tsunami management, just add water and an earthquake" does not work. Let us look instead towards ourselves, our governments, and the international community and what all of us did not do before the Indian Ocean tsunami. Ilan Kelman is involved in applied research and capacity building for disasters, risk, and vulnerability in the context of building safe and healthy communities and sustainable livelihoods. He works on disaster diplomacy, disaster deaths, and his principal interest of vulnerability reduction on small islands.

