

Opinion

Facing disaster

Earthquakes, tsunamis: We know they're coming; why won't we prepare?

By Oakley Brooks

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Writing From Padang, Indonesia – I went to a flattened college on Saturday. The names of the dead were scrawled on a sliver of salvaged dry-erase board. A crowd of gawking teenagers hovered near an excavator working the rubble, along with the dowdy, fidgeting headmistress. Periodically sobbing parents were hanging about in the background. When the searchers reached five students crushed below a staircase, and soldiers emerged from the rubble bearing black body bags, a grim practice followed: A rescue worker would bring a student's putrid backpack or purse to a shocked mother or father to confirm whom they'd found. And the waiting youngsters with camcorders and cellphone cameras flocked around the scene like moths to a light.

"It's Indonesian culture," said a young social worker from Jakarta, watching the scrambling crowds.

I'll raise him one. It's universal culture. The innate drama of life and death, ramped up by natural disaster. Survivors and observers -- we're always the obliging spectators, either pushing the boundaries of decency on site or sitting on the couch at home.

Here's the real trouble with this culture: We haven't figured out how to convert our post-disaster fascination into an enthusiasm for pre-disaster adaptation. We don't quite know how, or aren't quite willing to convert, a robust body of information about hazards into action, especially in the developing world.

An earthquake, tsunami and typhoon-filled week like the last one only confirms our preference for reacting to hazards after the fact. West Sumatra's situation is one of the most frustrating. More than 70 aid agencies and millions of dollars worth of help are pouring in here, as they should, with the right spirit even if aid doesn't get to the neediest. But another point of urgency might have come almost five years ago after the Aceh earthquake and tsunami to the north, when scientists, using a history of earthquakes extracted from offshore corals, unequivocally forecasted more major activity and tsunami potential along the Sunda megathrust fault here.

The West Sumatran government in Padang, however, seemed only mildly interested in motivating people to change -- offering little in the way of education or proactive urban planning in a compact city of 900,000 squeezed in next to the ocean. The attitude changed after a hard shake from a magnitude 7.9 quake offshore in 2007, and there have been efforts since then to identify tsunami escape roads and safe buildings. The irony is that many of the tall buildings identified as havens in case of a tsunami crumbled in last week's quake.

And scientists say another great earthquake, up to magnitude 8.8, is still in store for West Sumatra within a generation.

Padang is a prime example of our modern hazard problems: heedless growth on the site of a series of historic, great earthquakes and tsunamis, one of which flattened what was a small trading town in 1797. We're amassing too many people in risky places, such as earthquake-prone Tehran and

Istanbul, and the U.S. Gulf Coast and West Coast, where seismic, hurricane and other threats are clear and population numbers and development patterns promise to turn a bad event into an all-out humanitarian crisis. Potential sea-level rise and more frequent tropical storms because of global warming will only compound the risk.

Governments cannot be counted on to manage the situation -- not in China's Sichuan province, where shoddy construction and little oversight from corrupt bureaucrats led to at least 5,000 dead schoolchildren in last year's earthquake, or in the American West, with its spreading population on the fire-prone forest fringe and along myriad fault lines.

In the developing world, humanitarian organizations are making disaster risk reduction a new priority. But where scientists have outlined natural hazards, we need a grass-roots movement to prepare and adapt to the hazards.

In West Sumatra, before the government began to act after Aceh, a group of Padang students backed by conscientious elders and informed by scientists went door to door to explain the risk of tsunamis and the need to move to high ground after a big earthquake. Now the local government treats the members of the Tsunami Alert Society as advisors. It remains to be seen if a culture of resilient building can germinate here, where concrete offices, hotels and houses for the wealthy looked strong but proved deadly last week.

Building one's life around sporadic events seems like an unnecessary worry in the workaday world, for people in West Sumatra as on the San Andreas fault. But the long history of earthquake faults and other natural phenomena fits us into a compelling story spread over the centuries, a tale populated by people and societies that have ignored that history at their peril, and brings meaning to today's seemingly random events and an urgency to getting prepared. Already in the remote Mentawai Islands, 90 miles west of Padang, some villagers are uprooting themselves and moving closer to the hills in the face of new tsunami risk and the evidence in the historical record. "They say this low land here was ocean in the past and might be again," Alpaus, a former village head on one of the islands, said in July in a recently constructed settlement close to a steep, tsunami-safe ridge.

The choices seem tougher in urban Padang and Los Angeles and all around the modern and modernizing world. Days ago, Sumatran businesswoman Yenni Gunawan admitted to an Indian geophysicist at a hotel here that she had never paid attention to what he and his colleagues had to say about seismic dangers. But her shop in Padang's Chinatown was heavily damaged in the earthquake. Now she is considering moving to eastern Sumatra with some close friends.

"What would you do?" Gunawan asked the scientist.

"This thing can possibly be beat with smart construction," he said.

"That takes a long time," she groaned, and walked off, undecided.

One thing is for sure: Standing and watching is out of the question.

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