

7.0 Earthquake Would Cause Severe Damage in Jamaica

- A 7.0 earthquake, similar to the one which struck Haiti on January 12, would cause major damage in Jamaica

Chris Hind, General Manager of NEM, said that the company commissioned several studies working with the Earthquake Unit at The University of the West Indies (UWI) and the Mona Geo-Informatics Institute to assess the impact of earthquakes on its insured properties. The objective, he pointed out, was to determine how vulnerable buildings insured by his company were, the potential damage to properties, and the sufficiency of NEM's reinsurance program.

"The results of the surveys showed that earthquakes of a magnitude of 6.5 and higher would result in damage impacting the NEM portfolio, even though our reinsurance is more than adequate," he said. It also revealed that Kingston, with its mid-rise buildings, would be particularly susceptible to these effects.

"This data, I am sure, would be replicated several times over if a similar study was conducted by other insurance companies," he said, "and it strengthens the call for improved understanding of insurance coverage."

Jamaica goes through an annual ritual of preparing for the Atlantic Hurricane Season from June 1 to November 30, Mr. Hind said. "This has been a key focus of disaster preparedness for many companies and citizens, and we are getting better at it."

"However, while hurricanes do represent a major recurrent threat to Jamaica, they are not the only threat," he said. "Floods, droughts, landslides and fire are also devastatingly regular features of our environment."

Despite this, research reveals that less than half the houses in Jamaica are insured, he said. Also even fewer take out insurance on contents, and many motor vehicles are partially or not insured at all.

The January 12 quake measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale, was felt locally in St. Andrew, St. Thomas Portland and St. Mary, according to the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management (ODPEM).

The disaster in Haiti occurred along the Enriquillo-Plantain Garden fault zone, which runs through the Plantain Garden River basin in Jamaica, through Haiti to Lake Enriquillo in the Dominican Republic. The previous major earthquake along the fault line was the 1907 earthquake which devastated Kingston, killing hundreds.

The UWI Earthquake Unit reports that the island is affected by about 200 normally minor earthquakes each year, but Mr. Hind said, "Although major earthquakes are infrequent occurrences here, nevertheless they do occur."

Additionally, Dr. Lyndon Brown, Head of the Earthquake Unit and Research Fellow at the UWI, discussed the frequency of tsunamis at a Jamaica Information Service Think Tank in Kingston early in January. He said Jamaica experiences these unusually large sea waves once in every 150 years.

“Jamaicans need to prepare for the high frequency risks such as hurricanes, fires and flooding,” Mr. Hind said. “At the same time, we must factor in the less frequent disasters to which we are susceptible.”