Tsunami Lessons

The world has been in a state of shock for the past two weeks, as details have unfolded of the death and destruction caused by the December 26 tsunamis that struck so many countries around the Indian Ocean. Our prayers are with all who have been affected, and we wholeheartedly support the ongoing multinational relief effort. Since many of our hotels are situated in waterfront locations, it is also important that we learn the lessons taught by this tragedy.

My first experience with a tsunami was quite personal. On April 1, 1946, I was a young boy living in a beachfront home beneath Diamond Head, not far from Waikiki. For no particular reason, at about 7 a.m., I went out to take a look at the ocean. I was surprised to find the reef almost bare, with fish flopping around. I ran to get my family. We all returned to the seawall and watched with fascination as the reef was suddenly covered with water once again. Our mood turned to horror as the water continued to rise, and waves began to smash against the seawall.

We were lucky. The ocean receded again, and we had time to run to higher ground before the next tsunami wave struck. Others were not so lucky. A total of 159 people died in Hawaii that morning, 122 of them on the Big Island alone. Damage totaled $26 million, much of it in Hilo, whose waterfront area was devastated. Many of the victims were probably like us, standing on the seashore, totally unaware of the oncoming danger caused by a magnitude 7.3 earthquake in the Aleutian Islands, thousands of miles away.

On May 23, 1960, a magnitude 8.3 earthquake in Chile sent another set of tsunami waves toward Hawaii, killing 61 people and again destroying the Hilo waterfront – damage came to more than $23 million.

Our planet’s surface is an unstable place that is constantly reshaping itself in many areas, particularly around the Pacific and Indian oceans. Pressures slowly build up deep beneath the surface and finally cause a sudden shift of the land, which we feel as an earthquake. If the shift moves the ocean bottom, a tsunami can be generated, just as you can generate a big slosh in the bathtub by suddenly moving your leg. Tsunamis happen somewhere almost every year, but unless there is severe damage or significant loss of life, people tend to forget.

As innkeepers of properties throughout the Pacific, we should be aware of the potential for tsunamis and be prepared. Work with local governments. Know if you are in an area that might be flooded. Have an evacuation plan and keep it current.

Fortunately, the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center is located in Hawaii. It is constantly on the alert for Pacific Rim earthquake activity and is linked to tsunami detection buoys that indicate if an earthquake has generated a potentially dangerous wave. This allows some time, although sometimes very little time, for low-lying areas to be evacuated.

Tsunamis cross the open ocean at about 500 miles per hour. This means that if a tsunami-generating earthquake happens thousands of miles away, there may be several hours’ warning, depending on local officials’ ability to quickly sound the alarm. If such an earthquake happens nearby, however, a tsunami may strike within mere minutes. Any unusual withdrawal of water from the shoreline should be taken as an immediate warning to run for higher ground.

According to the New York Times, the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center saw the potential for the December 26 magnitude 9.0 earthquake to generate tsunamis and sent an
immediate warning to 26 countries, including Thailand and Indonesia, minutes after recording the shock. Sadly, most of the countries alerted were around the Pacific – the normal "client" nations of this Pacific-oriented center – and thus, outside the danger zone. There was no system in place for alerting most of the countries bordering the Indian Ocean, where the danger was rapidly turning into cataclysm. Nor were many of these countries well prepared to quickly get the information to authorities in coastal regions. That is why there was no advance warning to the people living and vacationing in the areas that were inundated.

From the news reports I have read, many who were killed or injured were standing on the seashore wondering why the tide was so low, just as my family and I did in 1946. Fifty-eight years later, I am very sad that, with all of the technology currently available, hundreds of thousands in Indonesia, Burma, Malaysia, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and the Seychelles still had no warning of the catastrophe that was about to strike just two weeks ago.