This week, Hawai‘i was blessed again as Hurricane Guillermo weakened to a tropical storm, kept on a northerly course and brushed past our island chain without causing significant damage.

It was a reminder that we must always be on high alert and prepared to deal with severe weather in every area where Outrigger Hotels and Resorts does business. This is particularly true in 2015 for our properties and staff in the Hawaiian Islands, where water temperatures have been unusually high – a condition that tends to keep approaching hurricanes from losing strength even as they head somewhat northward.

Our island chain sits in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean and is normally threatened by about four or five tropical cyclones each year. So far this year we have been lucky in that no hurricanes have made landfall, but it was only last year that Hurricane Iselle caused considerable damage on the Big Island of Hawai‘i.

According to Andrea Thompson, writing for Climate Central, although Hawai‘i is in a tropical region, it “doesn’t have the same risk of being hit by tropical cyclones that islands in the Caribbean or Asia have. That’s because Hawai‘i is typically surrounded by relatively cold ocean waters.

“Hawai‘i is in a region with wind patterns that tend to produce a lot of ‘shear,’ or a difference in the speed or direction of winds at different heights in the atmosphere that tend to rip apart a storm,” Thompson adds.

“But this summer and last, that natural protection has been diminished. An El Niño has reversed those upper level winds and reduced some of the shear that can break up storms.

“Storms also tend to form further [sic] to the west in the eastern Pacific during El Niño years, which makes it more likely they could reach Hawai‘i. The relationship between a higher hurricane risk for Hawai‘i and El Niño has been well established.

“Waters around the islands have also been unusually warm, though this isn’t thought to be the result of El Niño. They are part of a widespread area of elevated sea surface temperatures spanning the length of the U.S. West Coast and reaching out to mid-ocean.” This is most likely one of the reasons the U.S. West Coast is experiencing such a severe drought.

Many of us vividly recall when Hurricane ‘Iniki hit Kaua‘i 23 years ago, uprooting lives, destroying buildings and shutting down the tourist industry for many months. It blew down every power pole on the island. Hurricane ‘Iwa also severely impacted Kaua‘i in 1982, and Hurricane Dot hit the Big Island in 1959.
Hurricane season Hawai‘i ... << From 1

Nor are the locations of some of our other properties immune from tropical cyclones. In 2002, Typhoon Chata’an and Super Typhoon Pongsona delivered a one-two punch and caused severe damage – including to our properties – on Guam, which sits right in the middle of the western Pacific’s “Typhoon Alley.”

With all this information in mind, it seems like a good time to get out the manuals, review safety procedures, emergency staffing procedures, etc. In Hawai‘i, “Hurricane Season” lasts from June through November. Let’s be prepared!

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1 http://www.climatecentral.org/what-we-do/people/andrea-thompson

2 tropical cyclones - The generic term for tropical storms, hurricanes and typhoons (Glossary – National Hurricane Center)

3 http://goo.gl/fMOQXy

*Iniki - Visitors wade down Kalia Road fronting the Outrigger Reef, 1992

Pacific storms crossed back and forth over the Hawaiian islands in 2012. Kiahuna Plantation Resort Kauai by Outrigger* experienced 7.4 inches of rain in 24 hours

*Iniki - A waterfall down the Outrigger Reef’s basement steps