Hawaii Dodges Triple Threat

This week, Mother Nature reminded us all that the normally safe and tranquil atmosphere of our Pacific resorts can change into something quite dangerous and chaotic in a very short period of time.

First, Hurricane Flossie was observed following a northwesterly track, aiming uncomfortably close to the Hawaiian Islands. Then the Big Island experienced earthquakes on Monday and Thursday with a magnitude of 5.4 and 4.0 respectively. Finally, came Wednesday afternoon’s brief Pacific tsunami alert after a devastating magnitude 8 earthquake off the coast of Peru.

Fortunately, here in Hawaii we merely experienced inconvenience, but with a little change in direction or location, any one of these events could have threatened the security of our properties, employees, and guests – not to mention our families and neighbors.

We had some time to prepare for Flossie. It appeared as a tropical depression on August 8 and then was followed closely, as it gradually strengthened on a track similar to that of 1992’s devastating Hurricane Iniki. Hawaii Civil Defense, the Central Pacific Hurricane Center, and the Joint Typhoon Warning Center were all confident that Flossie would come close to the Big Island but not get near enough to do much damage. The atmospheric conditions that caused Hurricane Iniki to make a sudden northward turn and slam Oahu and Kauai – which took the brunt of this Category 4 storm’s 160-mph wind gusts – did not appear to exist in this scenario.

Regardless, the Outrigger Emergency Command Center prepared for the possibility of a change in direction and requested all the hotels to start down the 36-hour Hurricane Milestones path. According to Safety & Emergency Planning Specialist Jerry Dolak, our hotels checked and replenished supplies, prepared emergency work schedules, and tested emergency generators. Operations contacted vendors for the possibility of more fuel, sandbags, and glow sticks. Our computer center backed up vital information and was prepared to protect it. Command Center sent out morning and afternoon bulletins updating everyone on the location of the storm, its intensity, and the possible storm surge, wind, and flood impact it might bring to the Big Island.

Fortunately, the storm quickly weakened as it neared the Big Island, and there was no damage. Likewise, the two Big Island earthquakes caused only a couple of landslides, and the Peru earthquake did not, after all, generate a tsunami.

Hawaii has not always been that lucky. I was just a 12-year old kid on April 1, 1946, when a magnitude 7.8 earthquake in the Aleutian Islands unleashed a tsunami that crashed into Hawaii without warning a few hours later, killing 159 people, 122 on the Big Island alone. I happened to be checking the surf conditions at Diamond Head Beach that morning and, like the tourists during the recent tsunami in Thailand, I watched the water suddenly recede, exposing the reef with fish flopping around. Moments later, the water returned, much higher than usual, and waves were slamming against the seawall next to our home. (Things were much worse in Hilo, where the shape of the bay funneled the water into 25-foot waves and sent them straight into the downtown/waterfront area, much of which was leveled, with people washed out to sea. It happened again in 1960 when an earthquake in Chile generated a tsunami that killed 61 and flattened 537 buildings in Hilo.)

In November 1982, Hawaii had little warning when Hurricane Iwa arrived. I recall I was giving a deposition in a lawyer’s office in downtown Honolulu and strong winds started to rattle the windows. We finally had to cancel the deposition, and within a few hours, we felt the fury of the storm, which nicked Oahu before slamming into Kauai and causing $239 million in damage.

When Hurricane Iniki hit a decade later, damage came to about $3 billion, and Hawaii’s hotels and its economy, particularly on Kauai, took a long time to recover.

My congratulations and thanks to all of the members of our ‘ohana who worked together as a professional team to be ready for Flossie. While we mourn for the hundreds killed in Peru this week, we can be thankful that we in Hawaii were all spared from harm. However, we should remind ourselves to always be prepared, because as the past has repeatedly shown, things can change overnight—and sometimes even faster.