Hurricanes, typhoons, cyclones: Not ‘if’ but ‘when’

By Dr. Richard Kelley

As I watch TV reports about the damage and loss of life caused by Hurricane Matthew as it passed over Haiti and along the U.S. East Coast just a few days ago, I am reminded that something similar has occurred and might again occur at the beachfront properties operated by Outrigger Hotels and Resorts. We should recognize the possibility, pray that it does not happen anytime soon, but be prepared for when it does. Because, sooner or later, it will.

The Hawaiian term for hurricane is *makani pahili*, and there are stories of severe storms in years gone by similar to one described in James Michener’s book *Hawaii*. Few records were kept back then, however, and today we have no idea how many tropical storms and hurricanes battered our Islands in olden days. When I was growing up in Hawai‘i during the 1930s, 40s and 50s, hurricanes were not something I worried about.

After the first weather satellite, TIROS 1, was launched in 1960, scientists at last had a way to locate and evaluate the tropical cyclones that are annually spawned in the Pacific and pass near Hawai‘i. They discovered that there are quite a few each year, with an average of 4.5 storms developing in the warm waters off the west coast of Mexico and Central America. Fortunately, only a few of these storms develop hurricane-force winds, and even fewer track far enough north to threaten the Hawaiian Islands.

Then, in 1982, Hawai‘i met Hurricane ‘Iwa, a storm to remember. It was appropriately christened with the Hawaiian language name for the frigatebird (‘iwa, literally “thief,” because it often steals food from other species). ‘Iwa, the storm, was soon to become the costliest hurricane to hit our state. It was the 12th and final storm of the 1982 Pacific hurricane season. It was born near the equator on November 19. The storm moved erratically northward until becoming a hurricane on November 23 and began accelerating to the northwest toward the Hawaiian Islands. ‘Iwa did a great deal of damage as it passed Waikiki, on O‘ahu’s south shore. But it did even more damage when it then slammed into Kaua‘i and Ni‘ihau.

Ten years later, in 1992, Hurricane ‘Iniki, with winds as high as 227 mph (365 kph), again damaged Waikiki in passing but devastated Kaua‘i and Ni‘ihau. There, high water marks reached over 20 feet (6 meters) with the highest at 28 feet (8.5 meters). Kaua‘i was without normal electrical power for 40 days, and 80 percent of the island’s homes were damaged or destroyed, according to government reports.

As ‘Iniki passed O‘ahu, I received a personal lesson in the power of the storm when, with a security guard, I...
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tried to place a 4-by 8-foot sheet of ¾-inch plywood over the beachfront stairs leading to the basement of the Outrigger Reef Hotel. A wave crashed down on us, knocking us to the sand and snapping the plywood in two as if it were no stronger than a Popsicle stick. It took several days to pump out the basements of the Outrigger Waikiki and Outrigger Reef hotels.

Our other properties in the Pacific and Indian Ocean area have also had direct experiences with the wrath of Mother Nature. The most recent event happened about eight months ago when Tropical Cyclone Winston¹,² hit Fiji. That cyclone, one of the strongest in memory to make landfall in Fiji, caused extensive damage to our Castaway Island resort, which was closed for four months while repairs were made.

With this experience, at Outrigger Hotels and Resorts we are always looking for ways to be better prepared for the next storm. We should, because as just about everyone who keeps a close eye on major oceanic storms says, it’s impossible to tell when a full-blown storm will bear down on one of our properties in the Pacific or Indian oceans, but eventually one will. Let’s be ready!

¹ Fiji properties recovering rapidly
² Cyclone Winston doesn’t dampen Fiji’s Bula spirit