

The UNESCO/IOC International Tsunami Information Center and its Role in the Caribbean

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The Tsunami Warning System in the Pacific (TWSP) is a global international early warning system dedicated to the monitoring of tsunami hazards in the Pacific and dissemination of timely warnings on potentially destructive distant tsunamis. The International Tsunami Information Center (ITIC), established in 1965 by the UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC), oversees many of its functions. Among these are the monitoring and recommendation of improvements to the TWSP, the facilitation of technology transfer to countries establishing national warning systems, and the maintenance of a tsunami library and clearinghouse for the development and distribution of educational and awareness materials in different foreign languages. TWSP warning operations are headquartered at the Richard H. Hagemeyer Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC); the USA hosts both ITIC and PTWC. The 26-member International Coordination Group for the TWSP (ICG/ITSU), a subsidiary body of the UNESCO/IOC formed in 1968, serves as the coordinating body for the system. The Tsunami Programme and ICG/ITSU are unique among the IOC activities as they oversee a fully operational and successful early warning system solely dedicated to saving lives and property.

In recent years, the ITIC has been involved in a number of tsunami warning system initiatives efforts outside the Pacific. Although the IOC Tsunami Programme has been centered in the Pacific for many years, there is no special regional significance to this beyond the proneness of the Pacific region to large earthquakes that can generate tsunamis. Recently, the Member States of the IAS, the South Pacific and Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean have been requesting more attention to tsunami warning in their respective areas, and the ITIC and ICG/ITSU have contributed their expertise in the development of warning system proposals by these groups.

In the Caribbean, the ITIC has been a member of the IOCARIBE Tsunami Steering Group of Experts and the ICG/ITSU Working Group that put together the IAS Tsunami Warning System proposal that was fully endorsed by the Seventh Intergovernmental Session of the IOC Sub-Commission for the Caribbean and Adjacent Regions (IOCARIBE) in February 2002. Recommendation SC-IOCARIBE-VII.2, subsequently adopted by the 35th Session of the IOC Executive Council, highlighted the importance of addressing the tsunami risk and called on Member States to continue to coordinate regionally towards the implementation of the system. Recently, the ITIC has encouraged the development of the Central American – Pacific Coast Regional Tsunami Warning System, and has been working with Nicaragua and El Salvador to improve their sea level monitoring capabilities and to provide in-country training on tsunamis and tsunami warning systems. Additionally, through the ISDNR Early Warning Conference consultations, the ITIC continues to work to elevate awareness of the Caribbean and Central American tsunami risk among regional disaster preparedness organizations such as CEPREDENAC and the OAS.