

Agencies working on quake plan

By P.J. ORTIZ
Of The STAR Staff

Government agencies are finally joining forces to confront a major earthquake seismic experts say could hit the island at any moment.

At least a dozen Commonwealth officials and seismic experts met at the First National Conference on Earthquakes in San Juan last week to explain the extent of Puerto Rico's preparedness for a possible quake.

Represented at the event were the Regulations and Permits Administration, the Puerto Rico Telephone Company, the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority, Department of Transportation and Public Works and the Civil Defense.

Although the event was directed at local businesses, much of the information was intended for the general public.

The overall prognosis, although serious, was not grim.

"This is not cause for panic, but it is cause for planning," said guest speaker Vitelmo Bertero, director of the Earthquake Engineering Research Center and professor of civil engineering at the University of California at Berkeley.

"A few years ago, Puerto Rico was not ready for such a disaster, but I have since seen a concerted effort on the part of the government to organize and establish policy to prevent a major catastrophe. "Hurricane Hugo got people thinking," he continued.

Bertero, who has studied the effects of seismic phenomenon around the world, predicted Puerto Rico will be hit by an earthquake similar in magnitude to the one that struck Loma Prieta, Santa Cruz, Calif., in 1989. The quake measured 7.1 on the Richter scale.

The last major earthquake to hit the island was in 1918, affecting Aguadilla,

Mayaguez, Añasco and Rincón.

Major tremors occur on an average of every 60 to 70 years, but in Puerto Rico the cycle has fluctuated between 51 and 117 years. It's been nearly 73 years since Puerto Rico's last major quake.

"No one can say when the next big quake will hit Puerto Rico," Bertero said. "It can happen any minute, in 10 months or 10 years. But the energy continues to accumulate."

Puerto Rico has three or four slight quakes everyday that are imperceptible to humans, noted Mickey J. Espada, executive director of the Earthquake Safety Commission, a body formed in 1986 by an executive order from Gov. Hernández Colón.

"What's important," says Espada, "is that we can prepare today."

People usually do not recognize the gravity of planning until something drastic happens, said Bertero.

One of the responsibilities of the government is to make sure that the construction of buildings adhere to safety guidelines. The same is true for the construction of road and bridges.

"We need to learn how to construct safer homes and buildings," Bertero said.

Many homes in Puerto Rico are built in stilts or piles. They are a no-no, says Bertero, because they are the first to collapse under a seismic disturbance.

It is better to pay more to have safer buildings than to have structures that will collapse and kill an untold number of people, Bertero said.

The cost of building stronger, safer structures, he says, should not run more than 3 percent over the total cost of a building.

The major cause of injuries as a result of an earthquake are from falling objects, added Espada.

Objects like glass, household and office

appliances, lamps, panel ceilings and hanging plants are potential hazards, he said.

While the government has a basic responsibility, the major task of getting ready for an earthquake belongs to the public, he said.

This also involves contingency plans for access to water, gas, electricity, harbors and, of course, medical help.

Bertero insists that one of the most important facets of earthquake preparedness is education.

From young children to adults, everyone can contribute to prevent widespread havoc.

"It has to be attacked by literature and in the schools," Bertero said. "Kids are good at returning home from school and teaching their parents."

How to respond to an earthquake is a new movement in Puerto Rico, and it involves absolutely every section of this society," he said.

Do not leave your home during an earthquake, said Espada. Seek refuge under a table, desk, bed or sofa. If you're in the street, stay there.

After the quake, shut off your electricity and gas lines; breaks in the electrical wires and gas leaks are a major threat, he said.

On an average it takes about 72 hour for help to get to you, Espada said.

Every household should also be supplied with three days worth of water, dry food rations, flashlights, a radio and a first-aid kit.

The key is to start talking and planning now, with your family and neighbors," Espada said.

For more information on how to prepare for an earthquake, write to the Puerto Rico Earthquake Safety Commission: P.O. Box 5887, San Juan, P.R., 00906.

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