

Earthquake relief

With the memory of tragedy and devastation in Sicily, Japan, Iran and California — among other places — still fresh in our minds, the news that Puerto Rico is an unlikely target of a disastrous earthquake, as reported in our front page story, comes as a relief.

Scientists report that even a major earthquake, one that measures 7.5 or higher on the Richter scale, would not cause serious property damage or great loss of life on our island.

They also report that based on past history and geological data, a strong earthquake is quite likely to occur here. Puerto Rico is surrounded by three major fault line systems which lie in the seas around us.

The fact that these fault lines are located under the sea rather than under the island itself is our good fortune. Only one of them comes close to land — at the southeast corner of the island.

The closer built-up areas are to fault lines (where the earth actually opens up), the more an earthquake is felt and the more serious damage occurs.

We are also fortunate that even the highest buildings here are built to withstand earthquakes. Since 1968 — before most modern buildings on the island were begun — a strictly enforced code ensures they can withstand hurricanes and earthquakes.

But we cannot be complacent. A strong earthquake will topple trees and utility poles, break windows, knock down shelves and fixtures, cave in poorly constructed roofs and cause other structural damage. Yet, throughout our history, not a single death has been attributed to the shaking of the earth during an earthquake.

More of a threat to life is the strong possibility of a 20 foot high tidal wave crashing into our shoreline some 20 minutes after the earthquake subsides. Tidal waves are a result of the sea water being drawn into and out of the earth at the fault lines on the ocean floor. Curious onlookers were killed by the score when this occurred in Mayaguez in the early 1900s.

We have to be prepared for both eventualities: the earth tremors themselves and the resulting tidal wave.

Knowing where to go and how to act in an earthquake can prevent injury and save lives.

Knowing that we are not susceptible to the worst ravages of an earthquake certainly can help prevent panic and bring peace of mind. ■