

LOCAL NEWS

Schools to be inspected for quake preparedness

By ROSARIO FAJARDO
Of the STAR Staff

The Education Department, in conjunction with the Civil Defense, will soon begin inspecting all of the island's 1,547 public schools to ensure they are adequately prepared to withstand a strong earthquake, officials said Thursday.

"We have to be prepared for an earthquake, whenever it may come," said Education Secretary Víctor Fajardo. "Like preparing for hurricanes, this is the best way for us to prevent an earthquake disaster."

The \$19 million project is being funded primarily by the federal Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The program will begin with 119 public schools in Ponce, Caguas, Mayagüez and Humacao, which will be redesigned and renovated as needed, to meet structural specifications to withstand strong

earthquakes, Fajardo said.

As part of the initiative, school principals and teachers also will be trained about what to do in case an earthquake strikes, while a van will act as a "classroom on wheels," touring the island's public schools and educating children about earthquakes.

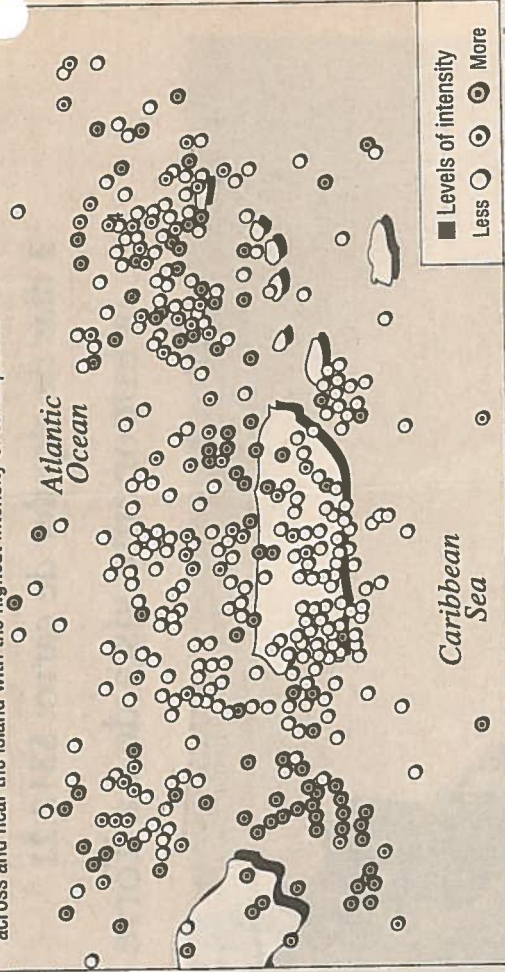
According to the Puerto Rico Seismic Network, there were 45 registered earthquakes in the region last month, and 41 registered earthquakes in October. "All of this is normal for Puerto Rico," said PRSN Executive Director Christa Von Hillebrandt.

The secretary denied that the timing of the announcement had anything to do with predictions by various fundamentalist groups that a massive earthquake will hit Puerto Rico on Dec. 15.

"This has nothing to do with that because we had planned this meeting for a long time," Fajardo said, as he quickly added that those reports are

Sites of activity

The Puerto Rico Seismic Network reported that in 1997 these were the sites across and near the island with the highest intensity of earthquakes.



SOURCE/PUERTO RICO SEISMIC NETWORK

STAR GRAPHIC/JOSÉ HUDO CASTAÑER

false. "There is no scientific evidence that earthquakes can be predicted," he said.

Experts agreed, including University of Puerto Rico Natural Science Professor José Molinelli. "These are myths and

fallacies that create anxiety and confusion," he said. "I know that some people also have said that if a giant earthquake hits Puerto Rico, that it will fall into the ocean . . . this is absolutely false too."