

LOCAL NEWS

Schools said unprepared to deal with major quake

By MARIA SOLEDAD CALERO
Of the STAR staff

Seismic Network Director Christa G. Von Hillebrandt warned, once again, that schools in Puerto Rico are not prepared for earthquakes, in spite of the growing risk of a major quake.

Von Hillebrandt said that it is urgent for schools, universities, hospitals, hotels, condominiums, dams, and all other structures to which large amounts of people have access, to be prepared to withstand an earthquake.

"Certainly it is urgent for schools to be better prepared to withstand and react to an earthquake," she said.

She added that in the 11 years she has been with the Seismic Network she has visited dozens of schools, both public and private, and is convinced that the island's schools are not prepared for an earthquake.

"Even at schools where the matter has



STAR file photo
Seismic Network Director Christa G. Von Hillebrandt

been taken seriously, many measures to fully comply with an effective seismic safety program have not been taken,"

said von Hillebrandt.

She said that "a good earthquake safety plan takes years to put in place, but it is important to start where nothing has been done."

"Remember that earthquakes, like other natural disasters, cannot be avoided, but the damage they do can," she said.

Von Hillebrandt said that the greatest danger is that buildings collapse.

Von Hillebrandt spoke at public hearings held by the Senate Internal Affairs Committee, which is evaluating earthquake plans for schools.

The bill's author, Popular Democratic Party Sen. Roberto Vigoreaux, agreed with Von Hillebrandt that "schools are more vulnerable in the case of a natural disaster," which is the reason the bill was introduced.

However, Amalia Liabrés, president of the General Counsel of Education, was of a different opinion.

She said that the GCE complies with

its responsibility to make sure that school facilities are satisfactory and do not put students' safety and health at risk.

"When schools are inspected to grant them a license to operate, or to accredit it them, we check that they have an emergency plan," said Liabrés.

Liabrés added that the plan includes contingencies for hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, landslides and other natural disasters.

Von Hillebrandt pointed out that between 1950 and 1990 "75 percent of deaths during earthquakes were due to the collapse of reinforced concrete structures."

According to the Seismic Network, in 1990 there were 314 seismic events, 364 in 1991, 678 in 1992, 787 in 1993, 816 in 1994, 644 in 1995, 721 in 1996, 469 in 1997, 622 in 1998, 596 in 1999 and 735 in 2000.

Between 1999 and 2000 there was an increase of 20.2 percent, according to the data.