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**Mayagüez will be first town to be fully prepared for disaster**

# P.R. tsunami warning system in the works

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**Turin Olympics end with closing ceremony circus**

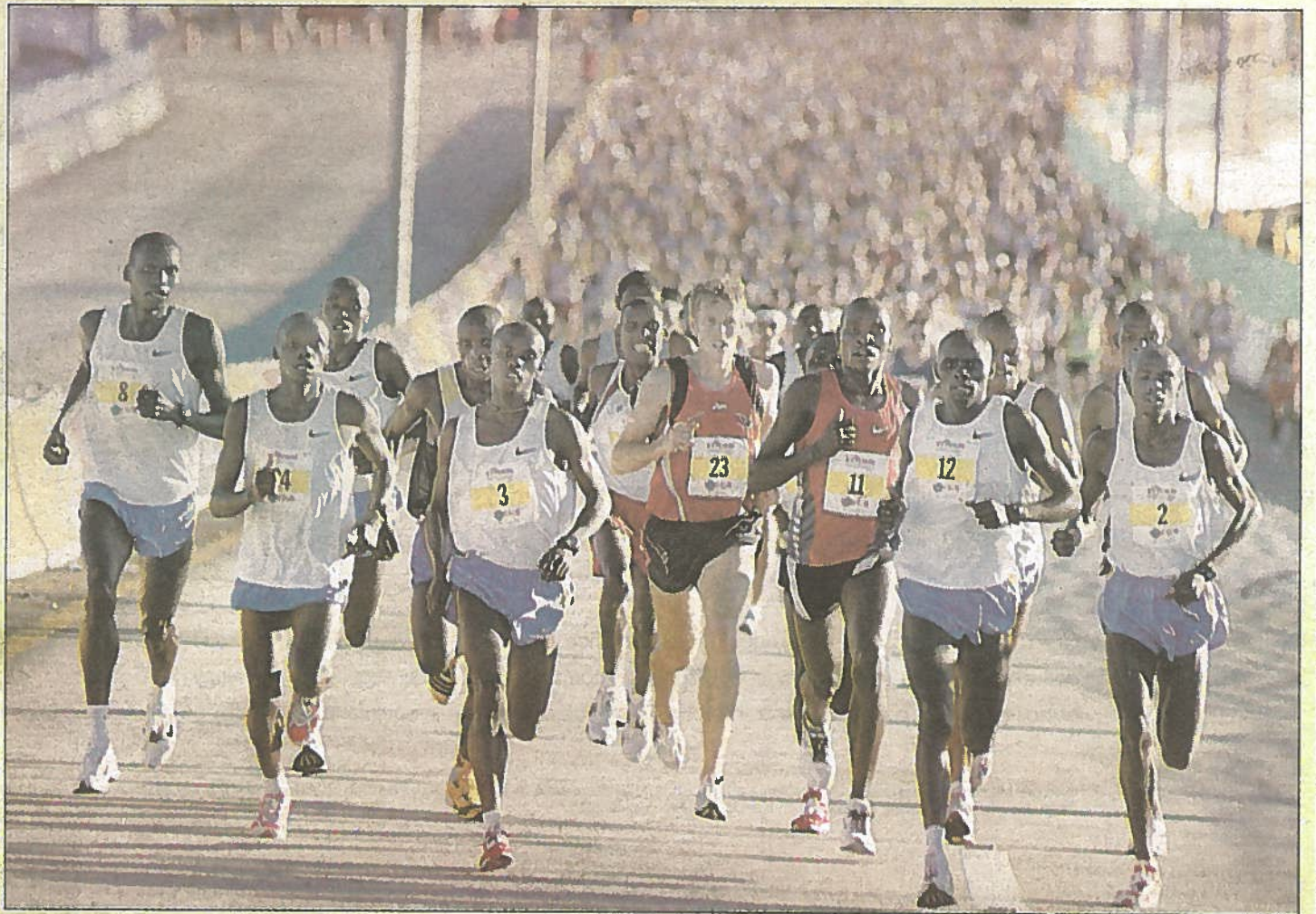
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## Record set in 'The World's Best 10K' race



Wilson Kebenel Kiprotich, far right wearing No. 2, runs a stretch of the Teodoro Moscoso Bridge Sunday on his way to winning the eighth edition of "The World's Best 10K" race. The Kenyan set a new record for the race when he completed the 6.2-mile course in 27 minutes, 43 seconds, besting the old mark by three seconds.

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# Tsunami warning system starts to take shape

BY JON RUST  
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Of The STAR Staff

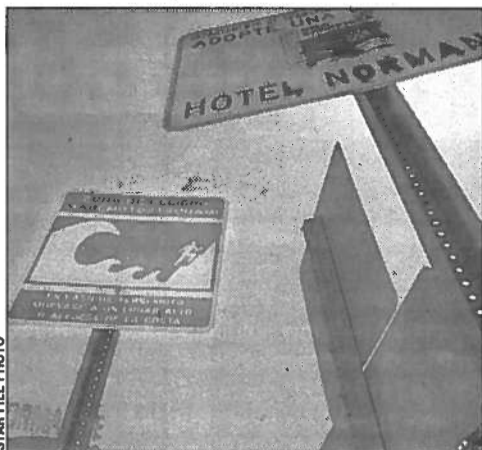
Local scientists used to call it "the forgotten hazard." Now, it seems, the threat of tsunamis in Puerto Rico is on everyone's mind.

New sea-level gauges are being installed to detect the potentially devastating waves, a warning system is being established and, for the first time, the island is getting funds through the National Tsunami Hazard Mitigation Program.

The city of Mayagüez is also set to become the first community in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean declared by the federal government as being well prepared to face tsunamis, officials involved in the effort said last week.

Puerto Rico Seismic Network Director Christa Von Hillebrandt, who has worked for years to call attention to the threat of tsunamis in Puerto Rico, said the devastating earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004 changed everything.

"Last year there was a lot of talk about what we wanted to do. This year we're getting things done," she said. "There's a lot of different things going on, all different facets — from the monitoring, to the protocols, to the



A sign across from the Normandie Hotel in Puerto de Tierra alerts people that they are in a tsunami zone.

awareness and the modeling. There's progress being made."

Four National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration sea-level gauges in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands have been upgraded, and the agency is installing six more, said Von Hillebrandt, a principal investigator for the Puerto Rico Tsunami Warning and Mitigation program.

Local officials also received federal funding to set up six more and "fill in the gaps," she



The 2004 Indonesian tsunami killed more than 200,000 people in a dozen countries.

said. While the Seismic Network can send out alerts in the case of large earthquakes capable of generating tsunamis, not all temblors create the waves and the gauges are key to avoiding false warnings, Hillebrandt said.

The gauges will enable officials to determine in a matter of minutes whether a tsunami is on the way.

"We'll be able to take much more intelligent decisions," she said.

The seismically active Caribbean has seen tsunamis in the past, including one in 1918 that caused major damage and loss of life along the west coast of Puerto Rico. In 1946, a major quake north of the Dominican Republic killed an estimated 1,800 people in the country.

The local tsunami-warning program was created in 2000, and included scientific studies, education, evacuation drills and the installation of warning signs that can be seen along the coast in San Juan.

But after the Indonesian tsunami, which killed more than 200,000 people in a dozen countries, the U.S. government announced concerted efforts to protect the Atlantic and the Caribbean from the waves.

The NOAA will begin next month to set up a multi-million dollar network of Deep-Ocean Assessment and Reporting of Tsunami buoys in the region, Hillebrandt said.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency granted the Seismic Network \$565,000 for the tide gauges, and the University of Puerto Rico and State Emergency Management Agency are provid-

ing funds for signs, sirens and radios.

For the first time, Puerto Rico is getting money through the National Tsunami Hazard Mitigation Program, Hillebrandt said.

"We have been requesting funding for over five years," she said. "After that tsunami, now it's coming through and we're on the right track. We're making significant progress."

## Becoming 'Tsunami Ready'

As part of the effort to get Puerto Rico prepared, the National Weather Service is working to get Mayagüez recognized as the first community in the Caribbean considered "Tsunami Ready" under a federal program.

Rafael Mojica, the NWS meteorologist leading the project, said the west coast city should be certified in early April. After that, the NWS will expand the program to include other coastal towns and, eventually, the entire island.

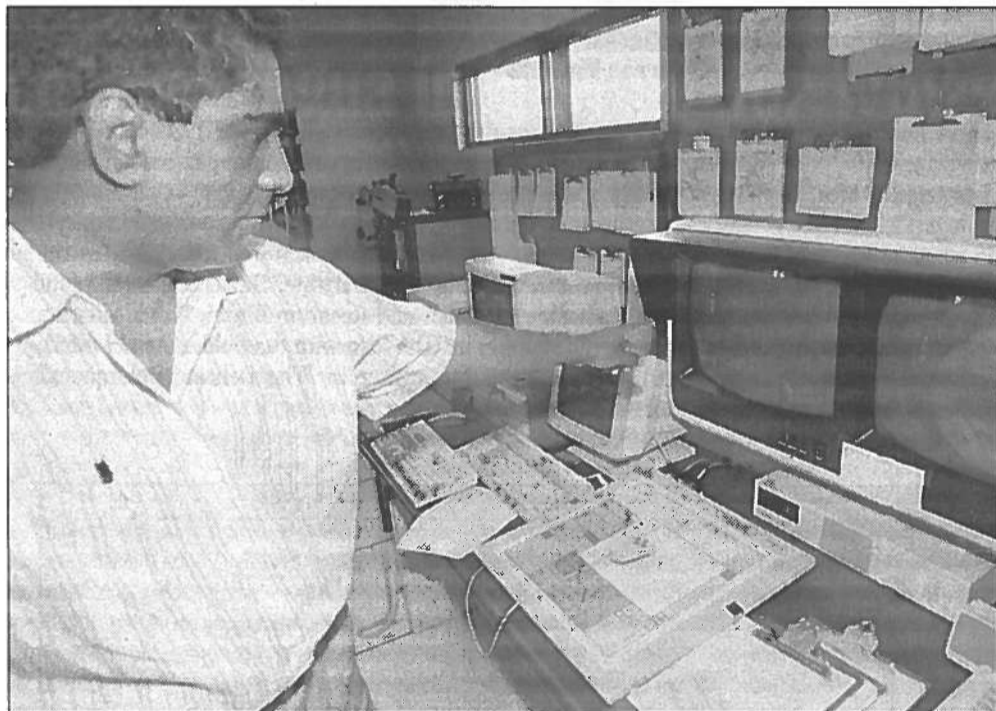
"[Mayagüez] is going to be the model city for all of the Caribbean," said Mojica, the warning coordinator for the NWS here.

To be recognized under the NOAA program, communities must have 24-hour emergency operations systems, establish warning protocols, have tsunami-inundation flood maps available and draw up evacuation routes, among other requirements.

There are currently 26 Tsunami Ready communities in the United States, primarily on the Pacific Coast.

Earlier this year, the city of Norfolk, Va.,

Please see "TSUNAMI," Page 6



National Weather Service meteorologist Rafael Mojica

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## Local Briefs

**EDUCATION STANDS FIRM ON ALTERNATE EVALUATION FOR SPECIAL ED CHILDREN**

Despite the continued criticism by the Puerto Rico Teachers Federation, the Education Department defended Sunday a report of alternate evaluation for special education children.

The report is the result of the teaching work the educator has realized with the student, Education said Sunday in a written statement.

The purpose of the Alternate Test of Achievement, or Portfolio, is to measure the progress achieved by special education students with severe handicaps.

The test is administered only on those students who need to take it and is designed according to the student's limitations and needs.

The Federation maintains that the test evaluates the student according to his or her age and not his or her true mental capabilities, which goes against all education principles.

Special Education Secretary Ernesto Pérez said that the department is not demanding from teachers a perfect portfolio, but rather that they "defend the student's right to have his, or her, achievement documented."

"We are worried that there may exist an attempt to undermine special education and its particular needs vis-à-vis [contract] negotiations and other matters dealing with the Teachers Federation," Pérez said.

**FUENTES BLASTS SANTINI FOR TIME SPENT MARCHING**

San Juan Municipal Assemblyman Roberto Fuentes denounced Sunday the "irresponsible" attitude by Mayor Jorge Santini, who is participating in the New Progressive Party's walk around the island, while the capital city's health system is in crisis.

"At a moment when the residents of San Juan need a public hospital that will attend their health problems, Jorge Santini abandons the capital city to do politics around the island using public funds. All this when there's a possibility that one

of the most important hospitals in the island may be privatized," Fuentes said.

He was reacting to comments by the Nurses and Health Workers Labor Union, which has denounced the deteriorating conditions at the San Juan Municipal Hospital and the alleged intent by Caguas' HIMA Hospital to purchase it.

According to Fuentes, this situation is part of a pattern of carelessness and lack of focus by Santini in regard to health issues, which range from million-dollar debts with the Río Piedras Medical Center, to the crass lack of attention to AIDS patients in San Juan, to substantial debts with suppliers.

"As if the mayor's negligence to attend to the homeless, hospitals without medicines, lack of payment to the medical center and the trash that continues to engulf our city weren't enough, the mayor's greed and ego have him so out of touch that he goes on useless marches instead of being here working for San Juan," he said.

**PARGA TO LEAD SERIES OF SEMINARS ON STATUS**

Senate Vice President Orlando Parga announced Sunday that this week will start a series of seminars related to island status that will be offered to the general public in several municipalities across the island.

The first seminar, dubbed Camp Barbosa, will take place Saturday at the Third Millennium Park in Puerta de Tierra at 8 a.m.

Parga said he was motivated by the lack of initiative by the New Progressive Party to educate the people on the possibility that there may be a status change in the next six years.

The activity will also commemorate the 89th anniversary of Puerto Ricans becoming U.S. citizens and to discuss the benefits of becoming a state.

"I will return to the time of town hall meetings to have a personal and direct contact that will allow me to dissipate doubts related to the plebiscite and to strengthen educating the citizenry on statehood," Parga said.

By STAR Staff and wire reports

**Tsunami**

became the first major East Coast city to be recognized under the program.

Mayagüez was the ideal community to launch the Tsunami Ready program here, Mojica said, because it is "highly vulnerable" to tsunamis and has a large population that could be affected.

The Mona Channel northwest of the island, an extension of the Puerto Rico trench, is an earthquake hot spot and the ocean is very deep, so there is no shallow water to slow down tsunamis.

That was the epicenter of the 1918 quake that sent a wave up to 20 feet high barreling into Aguadilla in a matter of minutes.

Hillebrandt said 30,000 people in Mayagüez work or live in areas vulnerable to tsunamis.

**Seismic Network upgraded**

The Seismic Network is also being beefed up with new instrumentation, Hillebrandt said: The U.S. Geological Survey is setting up new seismographs throughout the Caribbean, and governments including the Dutch Antilles and Cayman islands are putting in stations, with the data available to the Seismic Network.

However, Puerto Rico still depends on the Pacific Ocean Tsunami Warning Center in Hawaii, which as of last year is staffed around the clock, for tsunami warning assistance.

"The big thing we're still missing is getting us working 24 hours," she said. "Hawaii has to rely on instrumentation,



Puerto Rico Seismic Network Director Christa Von Hillebrandt

they don't know what's going on here."

NOAA, the parent agency of the NWS, considering making the Seismic Network an around-the-clock operation and tsunami-warning center for all of the Caribbean, Mojica said.

Meanwhile, educating the public about tsunamis remains a vital component of preparedness, he said. Tsunamis can be generated far away and take hours to arrive, but in the Caribbean they tend to be sparked by nearby quakes and hit shore quickly.

An untold number of people died in 2004 when the sea retreated ahead of the tsunami and people ventured onto shore out of curiosity.

"People should know that they have to move fast" if they feel the earth shake, Mojica said. "The important thing is planning, planning, planning."

Getting Mayagüez certified as Tsunami Ready "is just the beginning," Mojica said. "I see it expanding throughout all coastal areas of Puerto Rico, but it's a long-term project."

In Hawaii, officials started with individual communities, and then got the whole state declared as Tsunami Ready. Mojica said that's his plan for Puerto Rico, but that it could take a up to a decade.

"I hope [a tsunami] never happens, but you've got to be ready," he said.

**Taxes**

cent.

López said such an increase in taxes would be a blow to retirees, who generally plan to live off their savings and investment income. Salazar acknowledged during a House hearing that he had reservations over the proposal.

In fact, during a House tax hearing last week, representatives from the Puerto Rico Bankers Association and the Securities Industry Association of Puerto Rico warned of financial "disaster."

They said that eliminating preferential rates for passive income would threaten the stability of local capital and banking markets, as investors would take their money to lower-taxed and higher-yielding investments on the U.S. mainland.

But investment bankers say lower taxes on investment income have actually helped the island avoid a worse slump.

Capital that flows into the island has nourished funds used to make loans for businesses and mortgages, they said.

Méndez has said preferential rates for passive investments have not been productive given the low rate of economic growth in Puerto Rico during the past few years.

The administration is proposing, instead, to lower taxes for small businesses and offer tax breaks to investors who buy up at least 20 percent of local corporations.

Economic Development and Commerce Secretary Jorge Silva Puras has said this is more productive than having preferred rates for passive income. Juan Lara, chief economist at Advantage Business Consulting, believes that the administration's goal of revising the local tax code all at once — including changes to corporate and inheritance taxes — is too ambitious given the complexity of the code and lack of stud-

ies on the potential consequences of such changes.

"I think the administration should just stick to getting sales tax and income tax rate cuts approved first to fulfill its pledge to the middle class and U.S. credit rating agencies," said Lara, who has been a consultant for the Bankers Association for almost two decades.

**Uncertainty over the transition**

Moreover, there is much uncertainty over how the transition to a sales tax-based system will be made and how much it would collect in revenues.

A July 1 startup date for the sales tax would present problems with double taxation of inventories that have been already levied with the current excise tax.

And taxpayers would not be able to claim sales tax rebates during the first six months of implementation, making for an effective tax increase.

Economist Fernando Zalacáin, founding dean of the Inter American Business School in Cupey, said the administration may have planned this arrangement to cushion any "disastrous" shortfall in sales tax collections.

Treasury officials have acknowledged that wide-ranging sales tax estimates — between \$1.6 billion and \$2.15 billion — are due to lack of accurate information on the amount of goods imported into Puerto Rico.

Even the high-end projection of \$2.15 billion would lead to tax collections falling short by \$153 million to meet estimated spending of \$9.975 billion for fiscal 2007, according to Treasury economists.

However, Silva believes Treasury's tax reform revenue projections are "too conservative."

He said he does not believe they include the impact on tax increases on passive income.