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Technology and Coping with Disaster

By John Savageau

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Natural disasters come in many shapes. From the incomprehensible carnage of last weekend's tsunami in the Indian Ocean, to hurricanes and typhoons, to tornadoes and drought, our world deals with the horror of disaster as a normal part of our lives. Throw in a bit of human influence through wars, terrorism, or the threat of weapons of mass destruction, and our need to deal with and overcome calamity almost becomes routine.

Watching CNN and the news channels gives a near real-time view of disasters. While some may find this a bit macabre, it also shows our ability to quickly respond to major events, on a global scale. The same technologies that allow us to view the aftermath of a tsunami also allow us to quickly gather factual data on the extent of a disaster, and use that for disaster planning and response.

Organizations such as the Pacific Disaster Center (<http://www.pdc.org/>), the Asia Pacific Area Network (<http://www.apan-info.net/>), try to assist regional nations to build better disaster planning models and response model through training and timely dissemination of critical information. Regional military organizations participate with each other on joint disaster planning (for other than wartime-related disaster) to organize their resources in response to a regional disaster, and can respond within hours to major problems.

While carnage on the scale of the Indian Ocean tsunami cannot be controlled within a day or a few days, the communications and real time information collection on the disaster will most certainly reduce the level of misery experienced by victims at a level that would not have been possible even 40 years ago. As aircraft and on-site persons (using satellite phones or other powerful mobile communicators) collect information on areas of Sumatra, Thailand, and other affected areas, the information is almost immediately being logged, evaluated, distributed, and prioritized among a number of emergency response centers operated by regional governments – as well as international relief agencies.

From the regional and international response centers coordination further occurs among members of organizations such as the Multinational Planning Augmentation Team (<http://www2.apan-info.net/mpat/>). MPAT holds frequent disaster response exercises among member nations to ensure coordination

lines and pre-planned responses are quickly executed. All MPAT member nations have access to central databases of planning information, available resources, and a "command center" mobilized when a regional disaster occurs.

Telecommunications and information technology are key components in our ability to respond to disaster. As real time information is collected, it is available immediately to all participants in the relief effort. Other technology - in particular military technology, can easily serve a dual use purpose in a disaster. The same troop transports designed to carry soldiers to war can carry refugees from a disaster. The same photo reconnaissance aircraft used to spy on enemies can provide a clear view of the extent of damage. The same technology used to collect electronic intelligence can locate attempts to use mobile phones, radios, and even audio signals of people stranded in remote areas. Infrared scanning used to identify enemy soldiers in a bunker or building can just as easily locate a family stranded in a jungle.

If you compare the current response to the Indian Ocean tsunami to the effects of tsunami damage following eruption of the Krakatoa volcano in 1883 (<http://www.drgeorgepc.com/Vocano1883Krakatoa.html>), you can see the extent of damage from that disaster was not even known for several decades.

In most cases disaster cannot be predicted. We are making progress predicting earthquakes, hurricanes, and eruptions - however science is no closer to effective disaster prediction than we are in fully understanding the human genome. Through effective use of communications, information technology, and dual use military/civilian technology transfer, we are getting much closer to reducing the level of pain following an event.

2005 will be a big year in further exploiting the potential of Internet and communications-related technology. Given the positive moves toward regional cooperation in activities such as MPAT, we should be encouraged our governments understand the need and role of technology in planning - as well as responding - to regional disaster.

John Savageau is a managing director at CRG-West, responsible for managing operations and architecture for several of the largest telecommunications interconnect facilities in the US, including One Wilshire in Los Angeles

What You Should Know About Renters Insurance

By Heather Colman

If you are a renter and do not have renters insurance you could be asking for a world of trouble. It is important that anyone renting anything from anyone have renter insurance in case a disaster should

strike. The disaster could be in the form of damage from leaks, flooding, fire, earthquake, or tornado. It could also come in the form of lawsuits or injury if a guest to your home has hurt themselves with. If disaster strikes at any time and you do not possess renters insurance you could lose everything and have no way of retrieving it or any way of replacing it.

You see your landlord insures the home itself if anything were to happen to it, but their policy will not cover your possessions. It is important to know what you can expect when you are looking for renters insurance. Not all insurance companies are the same; they may offer different coverage than another and will almost certainly depend on what area of the world you live in. In general, your insurance company will likely cover events such as lightning, fire, smoke, and hail or a windstorm. Your insurance company may offer additional coverage with the policy or at an additional fee to cover flooding, water damage due to damaged pipes, damage to your property from vehicles or aircraft, falling objects, and riots.

In the event that damage to your possession has occurred your renters insurance, will help in one of two ways, either by issuing you a check for the actual cash value of the damaged items or issue you a check for the amount it will take to replace the damaged items. The difference between the two is simple, the actual cash value will be the amount it will cost to replace the damaged items with the depreciation value subtracted.

While you cannot replace the actual items that may be of high sentimental value, renters insurance will allow you to at least be able to retrieve replacements for your items. If ever a disaster were to strike your rented home, you could still be able to lead the same quality of life with renters insurance.

It is important that you speak with your renters insurance agent and know everything that is covered, what the costs are monthly, what your deductible is, and how to file a claim if a disaster should happen to strike.

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