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Europe's Tsunami of Inaction Against Tsunamis

By [COSTAS SYNOLAKIS](#) | From today's Wall Street Journal Europe

ATHENS

Four years after a mega-tsunami killed more than 250,000 people in Asia, the Mediterranean remains the only world ocean or sea unprotected by any warning system. Yet deadly tsunamis occur at least as frequently in the Mediterranean -- a huge boundary between colliding plates almost as long as its Sumatran counterpart -- as in the Indian Ocean.

Portugal was finished as a world power following the 1755 Lisbon tsunami. A tsunami in 1908 in Messina, Italy, killed thousands, and the 1956 Amorgos earthquakes in Greece triggered waves rising up to the level of five-story buildings. Istanbul has seen more destructive tsunamis than conquerors.

Despite significant research funding -- or perhaps because there is so much funding to be had -- there is provocative inaction as Europe wastes time debating how many regional centers it needs, where to put them and how to name them. Old-fashioned scientific rivalries are major stumbling blocks to finding a quick and effective solution. A Unesco initiative is under way this week in Athens to tackle this problem.

Unesco first got involved in this field following the 1960 Chilean tsunami that killed over 1,000 people in Chile, Japan and Hawaii. Then, following the 1964 Alaskan tsunami, and to address the less than perfect communication between the two rival superpowers of the time, Unesco formed its first intergovernmental coordination group for tsunami warnings. In turn, this led to the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC), situated in Hawaii, then believed to be the tsunami capital of the world. From detecting only earthquakes at first, the PTWC built the capability of detecting tsunamis as they spawn almost anywhere in the Pacific.

Following the 2004 disaster which annihilated townships from Sumatra to Sri Lanka to Somalia, real-time tsunami forecasts are now routine in the Pacific, with a 100% success rate to date, an incredible leap forward in four years.

While they develop their own national and regional capabilities, countries in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean Sea have asked the PTWC to act as their interim warning center. The new Indonesian warning system is slated for inauguration this month in Jakarta, following an investment of €50 million by Germany. India and Australia now have fully working national centers, while the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the U.S. has assisted both with instrumentation and the sophisticated forecast technology used in the Pacific. Unesco is providing educational materials and cheerleading. This is international collaboration at its very best.

Mediterranean nations need to take note. Most European children learn less about protecting themselves in case of a tsunami than do many kids in small island nations in the developing world. There are no functional regional or national tsunami warning centers in the Mediterranean, even among those countries which fund initiatives in the Caribbean and the Indian and Pacific oceans. The early warning wheel is being reinvented one nation at a time.

Europe should know better than to hesitate or rely on new untested systems in a matter where delays can be deadly. Based on research and experience in other regions, Europe can develop a world-class tsunami detection and forecast system. Until it does so, it should follow the example of the collaboration between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the 1960s and ask for temporary coverage from the only functioning international warning center, the PTWC -- it's free. The people of the Mediterranean and summer tourists from around the world deserve the same protection as the other five billion people of the planet.

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