

Port of Spain in grave danger of sinking



Seismologist Dr Illias Papadopoulos says the city of Port of Spain is in grave danger of sinking below the ground in the event of a major earthquake.

Papadopoulos, who was speaking during a Rotary Club of Central Port of Spain meeting at the Normandie Hotel in St Ann's yesterday, warned that a major earthquake is due to hit the region in the coming years.

He said while an earthquake cannot be predicted, the region expects an earthquake with a magnitude of 7 or more approximately every 27 years and he said it has been long overdue.

Papadopoulos, an engineering seismologist at The University of the West Indies Seismic Research Centre (SRC), said there has been "vivid" earthquake activity in the region in recent years with an average of 2,200 small earthquakes being recorded each year.

He said two specific earthquake zones are posing a major threat.

The zones are located north of the Gulf of Paria and within the Gulf of Paria.

"This area is actually ready to give one of the biggest earthquakes that we expect here, which probably will be a magnitude of 7 or 7.5," he stated.

Better building codes

"These two zones are the ones that we consider most highly likely to give us the next big event in the years to come."

Papadopoulos said the city of Port of Spain is at a greater risk of devastation because of water saturation.

"There is a lot of water in the land, especially on the coast...you can dig a metre down and you will find water."

As a result, he said the land would "move like water" in the event of a major earthquake in a process called liquefaction.

"This is something of special concern, especially for Port of Spain. Port of Spain is in grave danger."

Papadopoulos said buildings falling apart would not be as much an issue as buildings being swallowed up into the ground.

"You might not see the buildings cracking and collapsing but you will see the building sinking," he said.

"It is not just Port of Spain, the whole country is in danger with regards to earthquakes and how they affect us," he added.

He noted recent landslides along the Lady Young Road and North Coast Road and said further erosion is bound to happen if preventative measures are not taken.

Papadopoulos also raised concerns with the quality of infrastructure, which he said has been a problem in developing countries.

He said many people build without engineering advice, leading to weak buildings that cannot withstand the force of an earthquake.

He said this was evident in the 2010 magnitude 7.3 earthquake that ravaged Haiti. He said, in that instance, 90 per cent of the buildings that collapsed were poorly constructed.

Questioned on his impression of T&T's infrastructure, Papadopoulos said the matter of building codes is one for engineers, not seismologists.

However, he said T&T buildings do not meet European standards.

"I can tell you for sure that the buildings here are not being built as they do in Europe."