

Kelman, I. 2006. "Resilience of Earthquake History". RiskPost: The Newsletter of the New Zealand Society for Risk Management, issue 5, no. 5 (May), pp. 7-8.

Full Text:

The hundredth anniversary of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake is an opportunity to reflect on, amongst other threats, the earthquake possibilities facing many locations. Along with San Francisco, Los Angeles, Tokyo, and Wellington are examples of cities in more affluent countries where past earthquakes are well-publicised and potential earthquakes receive extensive preparedness. That status applies to many cities in less affluent countries too, although in other places the threat is known yet preparedness and awareness are low.

Lest more affluent countries become overconfident, some lesser-known earthquakes should be considered. On 18 October 1356, Basel, Switzerland was rocked by an earthquake which destroyed several dozen castles. Vienna experienced damage and casualties from a 15 September 1590 earthquake and a similar or greater intensity of shaking was witnessed in other Austrian locations in 1201, 1348, and 1690. Charleston, South Carolina was levelled on 31 August 1886. Work at Stanford University puts Boston's earthquake risk, epitomised by the 29 October 1727 and 18 November 1755 shakings, equivalent to San Francisco's and Mexico City's. Also in 1755, the 1 November earthquake and tsunami which ruined Lisbon are relatively well-known.

The reaction across Europe to those events has been proposed as founding the modern view of disaster social science. Yet how much earthquake and tsunami awareness and preparedness exists today in coastal Portugal? The New Madrid 1811-1812 earthquakes in southeastern USA are also frequently referred to and a similar future event appears in "Richter Ten", a novel by Arthur C. Clarke and Mike McQuay. But how much earthquake awareness and preparedness exists today in that region?

All the above events occurred a long time ago from a human perspective. Each event happened a few minutes ago from a geological perspective. The past has lessons to teach us even when those lessons seem remote in time. Boston or Vienna might not be hit for another millennium or it could happen tomorrow. We must never forget history.

Meanwhile, other locations are vulnerable. Sydney, Australia and Vancouver, Canada are increasingly receiving publicity about the possibility of their own "Big One". We must not be afraid of confronting possibilities and planning for the future, using the past as a guide but not relying on only the past. History is one important part of our portfolio in stopping earthquakes and other normal environmental events from becoming disasters.

Ilan Kelman

<http://www.ilankelman.org>