



OFFICE OF THE
PREMIER
CAYMAN ISLANDS GOVERNMENT

Statement about earthquake

By Premier Hon. Alden McLaughlin, MBE, JP, MLA

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Legislative Assembly

Mr. Speaker, as everyone is very much aware on January 28th, at 2:10pm, a 7.7 magnitude earthquake occurred south of Cuba and northwest of Jamaica at a depth of 10km. Strong earth tremors were felt across the Cayman Islands and our neighbours. At 2:17pm preliminary notification was received from the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center, the official source for tsunami information for the Caribbean that a 7.3 earthquake event had occurred and that tsunami waves were possible for the Cayman Islands. The magnitude was later corrected to 7.7.

A series of aftershocks were felt in the 12 hours that followed the initial earthquake. Hazard Management Cayman Islands coordinated public warnings, including the activation of a radio interrupt system and prepared for opening public shelters, should there be a need. I am grateful that the Red Cross did open their shelter at 7pm on Tuesday.

I can advise this House that at 2:19 pm, less than 10 minutes after the initial shock waves were felt; Hazard Management Cayman Islands interrupted all radio stations alerting the public that a serious earthquake had occurred and that a potential tsunami was possible for the Cayman Islands. Advice such as moving away from the coastline and low-lying areas were included, as was moving to upper floors of strong reinforced concrete structures if this was an option. These radio interrupts were repeated several times. Alerts were also posted on Hazard Management's website and social media pages.

Following the earthquake, and as an immediate precaution, the Royal Cayman Islands Police Service helicopter was deployed to survey the coastal areas of Grand Cayman for signs of damage and potential tsunami waves. No such evidence was observed during these trips. Between 3:04 pm and 3:08 pm HMCI issued updates on social media and the Cayman Prepared website stating that it was now considered unlikely that the Cayman Islands would be impacted by a damaging tsunami as information from the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center indicated the first tsunami wave would have already passed the Cayman Islands and the main threat now related to the possibility of aftershocks. At 3.49 p.m. the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center confirmed there was no danger of a tsunami.

I'm extremely grateful that after such a significant earthquake we have come through fairly well with no loss of life or serious injury being reported. The tremor shocked and shook us all, but

we did what this incredible country does when faced with such moments – we rallied.

Mr. Speaker, immediately following the quake I, along with the Governor and the Minister of Home Affairs, joined the National Emergency Operations Center of Hazard Management at the Government Administration Building and observed the very capable team there.

I commend the Hazard Management team for their quick response and their tireless work through the day and night working with the Joint Communications Services and other Emergency Support Teams such as utilities to keep Caymanians, residents and visitors informed with up-to-date information.

The Governor, I and Minister of Home Affairs, who has responsibility for Hazard Management Cayman, gave a joint televised statement as soon as it was practical to do so, at about

3pm. We later that day provided a televised update that included Hazard Management personnel.

From what I observed on Tuesday, the investments that this Government and the last Administration have made in keeping our communities safe and secure including upgrading the Islands' disaster communications capability are paying off.

Mr. Speaker, we have invested heavily in our safety and people through Phase I of the National Emergency Notification System, which allows radio interruptions. Complemented by a dedicated communications team that included GIS, Radio Cayman and CIGTV, information was provided quickly to a concerned public. There is a second phase of National Emergency Notification System launching in April or May in the form of a 'Phone App' that will provide immediate notifications through text messaging and social media. I encourage all who are resident in these Islands to install the 'app' once it is available.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the Royal Cayman Islands Police Service for their work to ease the flow of traffic and help diffuse what could have become an untenable situation on our roads and the Cayman Islands Fire Service for the role its members played. Grand Cayman didn't experience this earthquake in isolation. It was felt on all three Islands. The District Administration on Cayman Brac and Little Cayman did an outstanding job as did first responders on all three Islands.

I also applaud those on the front line who worked with vision and determination Tuesday afternoon and throughout the night to ensure our utilities remained functioning and safe. Mr. Speaker, the Water Authority worked valiantly to isolate leaks and have most of water back on by Wednesday.

I believe all of the schools are open today, except UCCI, returning normalcy to the lives of students, faculty and staff. We

decided to close public school buildings on Wednesday to ensure the safety of those structures and of course, some had no water.

I commend the men and women – civil servants, public servants and private sector – who went in to work in the wee hours of Wednesday morning to begin the long arduous process of inspecting structures for safety.

I thank all of those who turned out to man our shelters, especially on the Brac where patients from Faith Hospital were relocated in the threat of a tsunami.

Mr. Speaker, we know there are many sink holes both here on Grand Cayman and Cayman Brac as a result of the earthquake and I urge motorists and pedestrians and everyone to use caution as they approach these areas. They are being dealt with as quickly as possible. I also ask the public to notify 911 or the Hazard Management Facebook Page if they come across sinkholes that have not been identified.

Mr. Speaker, before I close I do want to remind the public that Hazard Management has warned us that we could experience aftershocks for approximately up to two weeks, so if you have not yet made an earthquake plan or don't know what to do during and after a tremor, look at Hazard Management's web page caymanprepared.ky.

Inevitably, there are things that could have gone better. We will be doing a full "lessons Learned" dissect across government and public agencies to ensure that our response is improved in the future, including a debrief Friday.

Yes, we have learned a lot since Tuesday afternoon about disaster management in respect to earthquakes and while there are still lessons to be learned from Tuesday's earthquake, the quick response and cool heads of those responsible for managing these types of events showed us that we are in a good place in helping to keep people as safe as possible in these eventualities.

Through God's grace and mercy this too shall pass.

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