



SHAKEN INTO ACTION

Tremors in S'pore drive home need for emergency plans

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EVEN as Singaporeans, shaken by several new tremors yesterday, wonder when the ripples spreading out of Indonesia will finally cease, one emergency expert is advising that they not react in a knee-jerk fashion.

As Wednesday night's 8.5-magnitude quake off the west coast of Sumatra set buildings in Singapore – up to 700km away – trembling, office workers and apartment-dwellers ran outdoors.

But really, the safest place during any tremor is indoors, said Mr Tony Ridley, the director of risk consulting at International SOS, citing "international practice".

"The velocity and size of the debris that may fall on you when you're outdoors is very different from the stuff that may fall on you when you're indoors," said Mr Ridley, who has over 17 years of experience in security emergency operations.

Of course, indoors, there is the threat of the building collapsing in on you. "But unless the entire building starts shaking violently, and the roof starts to fall off, it's really safer to stay under shelter," he added.

The Building and Construction Authority (BCA) has assured, local structures, designed with in-built strength, are "unlikely" to collapse from tremors caused by distant temblors.

Even so, the scene on Wednesday in Singapore's business district was one of confusion. It threw into sharp focus the lack of set procedures at many office buildings which, while required by law to have proper fire evacuation measures in place, are far less prepared for tremors.

At Republic Plaza, MediaCorp hotline caller Firnando Chau said: "I found it surprising that



CARS CRUSHED: A car showroom which collapsed in Padang following the earthquakes.

DID YOU FEEL THAT?

| S'PORE TIME | MAGNITUDE | DISTANCE FROM S'PORE | TREMORS FELT HERE? |
|--------------|-----------|----------------------|--------------------|
| WED 7.10PM | 8.5 | 700km | Yes |
| WED 10.40PM | 6.5 | 650km | No |
| THUR 7.49AM | 8.3 | 600km | Yes |
| THUR 10.30AM | 6.7 | 550km | No |
| THUR 11.35AM | 7.1 | 650km | Yes |

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there were no announcements by the building management until around 8pm – after the tremors had died down – when we were informed, over the public address system, to stand by for further instructions."

When the tremors struck at about 7.15pm, he had opted to stay in his office; however, many of his colleagues sought refuge outdoors.

But over at Millenia Tower, yesterday's early-morning tremor – the reverberations of a fresh 8.3-magnitude quake – led its property management to put up a sign at the entrance alerting workers coming into the office.

As the tower was then largely empty, no evacuation orders were given. "Our building management team did a visual check of the building and found it to be safe. After that, we updated our tenants on a regular basis," Ms Carolyn Lee, corporate communications manager of the Pontiac Land Group, told *Channel NewsAsia*.

The management said it has in place a standard operating procedure (SOP) that includes plans for evacuation if necessary.

The building management at OCBC Centre along Chulia Street was equally quick to react on Wednesday night. All tenants were alerted immediately.

"We told everyone to stay calm while investigations were conducted," an OCBC spokesperson told TODAY.

"We simultaneously made calls to the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF), BCA and the Singapore Police Force to confirm

if it was safe to stay indoors."

At another major office building at Raffles Place, however, the property management decided not to make any public announcements, for fear it would "create undue alarm".

In response to queries, the BCA confirmed there was no SOP for such circumstances. But it advised tenants to "check for any visible sign of structural defects on building elements" and strictly follow the SCDF's guidelines.

Such SOPs may have future relevance, given that experts say the region can expect more quakes in the days ahead.

Geological records show that such big earthquakes occur in 200-year cycles – and we are now at the tail end of a dormant period, Dr Kerry Sieh of the School of Civil and Environmental Engineering at NTU told *Channel NewsAsia*.

Mr Ridley's advice is that upon being notified of tremors, building managers should conduct preliminary checks: Look for any cracked walls, gas leakages or power failure. And while there is no need to evacuate the building, security personnel "should start to open emergency escapes, just in case".

"But it's not just the responsibility of the building managers – internal communication within organisations is essential, as at the end of the day, it's the responsibility of the management to account for their employees," he added. "Companies need to come up with a master plan and inform staff about it."

As of 7.45pm last night, engineers from the HDB and BCA had inspected 337 HDB, private and commercial buildings and certified them structurally safe.

There's the possibility of a significantly bigger earthquake than Wednesday's.

— NTU's Dr Kerry Sieh