

New Zealand earthquake preparedness: Authorities battled complacency

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Wellington, New Zealand New Zealanders have received a violent wake-up call: It's past time to be prepared for the "Big One" – the long-feared major earthquake authorities have been warning about for years. As this small island nation picks up the pieces from the 6.3-magnitude earthquake that walloped its second-largest city, Christchurch, leaving scores dead and hundreds of people still trapped, officials are set once again to assess whether routinely dire warnings have yet led to the hoped-for sea change in the nation's preparedness. Local building regulations in place since the mid-2000s appear to have served the city well, according to Graeme Beattie, a structural engineer in Christchurch this week to look at the seismic response of structures. In 2001, Mr. Beattie joined a similar reconnaissance team to Seattle following the Nisqually earthquake, and again in Chile after last year's Maule earthquake. Beattie says that what he has seen here looks like relatively good news for the owners and inhabitants of buildings made to the more rigorous standards of the past five years. "Certainly," he notes, "I haven't seen any supermodern buildings that have come to serious grief." At the same time, he says, it remained harder to quantify the question of psychological preparedness among the city's 400,000 inhabitants. "It's easy for people to become complacent, to forget [the threat of earthquakes]," says Beattie. Especially in a natural setting like Christchurch. Much of the outlying region of Canterbury Province is pancake-flat, leading many throughout the years to suppose that the threat of a devastating earthquake in the immediate area had receded over the millenniums. Any cataclysmic earthquake in Canterbury, it used to be said, would radiate out from the Great Alpine Fault in the South Island. Yet the 7.0-magnitude quake on Sept. 4 was far removed from that main zone, and Tuesday's quake farther still. New Zealand hasn't lacked for initiatives aimed at keeping the geological realities of a shaky country in the public mind. Schoolchildren here are routinely drilled in the art of diving under a desk or hunkering underneath an available doorway. Such activities have gathered pace in the last decade. In 2001, the country's Earthquake Commission introduced a long-running "Fix, Fasten, Forget" program, a television campaign led by two comic characters forever making the "wrong" preparations for a possible earthquake. The campaign was judged

a success. More recently, however, a widely watched television program, “Are You Ready?” considered the same questions, with its producer making much of the need for “a complete rethink about the way the entire bureaucracy is structured” in terms of buildings, insurance, and emergency plans. In a statement, the New Zealand’s deputy premier, Bill English, said that the country had, at least, proved itself to be well prepared on the insurance front. The Earthquake Commission, an official agency that handles most of the financial aftermath of an event of this kind, had already been improving its assets after last year’s quake. Coupled with the “reinsurance” the commission had taken out after the September temblor, Mr. English says this meant it could meet the cost of claims for damage to residential properties resulting from what officials here now routinely refer to as New Zealand’s “darkest day” – the “Big One” they tried to warn everyone about.