

Piece of Mind -- worrying about the Big One

Carol Cormaci, La Canada-Flintridge Valley Sun, 2-25-11

The images alone are enough to scare anyone living in earthquake-prone countries, but it was a particular photo caption on the front page of the Wednesday L.A. Times that sent shivers down my spine: “Women hug in front of a ruined building in downtown Christchurch. The magnitude 6.3 quake, an aftershock to a September quake, damaged even structures built to standards used in California and Japan.”

As one of my colleagues was saying Wednesday morning, any one of the major news events around the globe on Tuesday would be enough to warrant major headlines: the unrest in Libya, where people who are revolting after four decades of the Kadafi regime are threatened with execution; the horrible murders of the four Americans captured by Somali pirates; and the quake that took the lives of more than 70 people (at least as of press time) in New Zealand. While it might have been a “good” day for members of media outlets hungry for stories to report, it was decidedly sad for the general population of our planet.

But I am somewhat removed from Libya (at least until the gas prices become even more astronomical than they already are) and from the Indian Ocean and the pirating that governments, for some reason, allow to continue unabated (I say, let’s send in armed forces dressed like yachtsmen, wait for the pirates to take the bait and then shoot all the bad guys so we can be done with it). Earthquakes are another matter. I’m all too worried that every day we go without a major shaker means we’re one day closer to experiencing one, which is why I should have stopped reading about the New Zealand temblor right after I saw that caption.

Not content with being merely unsettled and dooming myself, perhaps, to a sleepless night, I dug a little further. I read stories online and came across — on multiple websites — a statement attributed to Robert Yeats, professor emeritus of geology at Oregon State University: “New Zealand has some of the most progressive building codes in the world. They are better prepared for an earthquake than many U.S. cities would be.”

It’s so easy to believe that our homes, offices and public buildings were built to standards that would protect us in the event of a major quake. We’ve seen incredible devastation and thousands of deaths in third-world countries sustaining major quakes, while we’ve made it through various seismic episodes relatively unscathed.

Take a close look at the images of Christchurch, though, consider the words of the experts, and you might agree with me that we can’t be too prepared for whatever the Earth may toss in our direction.

Earthquake insurance, anyone? That’s one policy I’m glad we have, but I’m thinking it might be time to reassess just how well we’ll be covered when the time comes to send in our claim. That is, of course, should we survive the Big One.