

Beep, beep, tsunami's coming

Going for a beach holiday? A new SMS alert service can keep you posted on possible tsunamis



► May Yip

SOCCKER scores, TV programme listings and bill payment reminders — these are just some SMS alerts available to mobile phone subscribers in Singapore.

Now, add tsunami warning alarms to the list of text messaging services.

A company here saw that such a service could find a market in the wake of the 2004 tsunami and the more recent tidal wave devastation of Javanese coastal towns in July this year. So it has launched a service aimed at beach-goers and travellers to coastal destinations, warning them of potential tsunamis anywhere in the world.

Mr Peter Dorney, managing director of Headline Marketing which distributes the alarm service here, says: "What this offers is peace of mind when you're on the beach, for anyone living in or visiting coastal areas."

Since it kicked off the service in July, more than 100 people have subscribed to it. It costs \$20 for one month or \$5 a month when you sign on for a year.

This is despite the fact that Singapore is not a tsunami hot spot.

Singapore's geographical position and the relatively shallow water in the Strait of Malacca and South China Sea make it highly unlikely that it will be affected by a tsunami caused by an earthquake in the region, says a spokesman for the National Environment Agency (NEA). "There are no records that Singapore has ever been hit by a tsunami."

Still, the SMS alert service has attracted the interest of big names like The Intercontinental Hotel group.

It is trying out the service to protect its region-wide waterfront properties and guests, says Mr Simon Loh, its Asia-Pacific director of risk management.

The group's Holiday Inn resort in Phuket was hit by the Dec 26 tsunami in 2004.

The text alert system, which has headquarters in Germany, the Seychelles and the Caribbean, receives earthquake and tsunami warning information from international stations that measure seismic waves originating from a quake.

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— Mr Peter Dorney, managing director of Headline Marketing, on the alarm service

The information is analysed by experts and an alert is sent out if necessary.

British mobile phone operator Vodafone already offers the service to its subscribers in Germany.

The alarm is also available from private distributors in over 20 countries.

In July, the alarm system sent out alerts around 15 minutes before waves hit Java, says Mr Dorney, 55, an Englishman who has lived in Singapore for 20 years.

Tsunami warnings are a new business for the company, which has marketed products as diverse as an upscale car rental service in Europe called Renault Euro Drive and Get Slim slippers — footwear which claims to stimulate a person's metabolic rate.

Mr Dorney says of his company's text service: "One of the problems with Indonesia is that out of a population of 200 million, there are only about 50 million mobile phone users. Unfortunately, on coastal Indonesia where the villages are, many people aren't very affluent and do not have phones."

Indonesian officials came under fire for the lack of any warning ahead of the tsunami that struck the southern coast of Java on July 17, despite regional efforts to set up an early alert system after the devastating 2004 tsunami.

But the Meteorological Services Division (MSD) of the NEA says Singapore is prepared in the unlikely event of a tsunami.

It is developing a national tsunami early warning system which will become part of a regional warning organisation. The system, comprising watch centres and monitoring systems, will be completed next year.

The MSD is also working with response agencies such as the Singapore Civil Defence Force to use existing as well as new communication channels to alert the public if a tsunami were to hit Singapore's shores.

But most Singaporeans might think the service unnecessary.

"It's not like we live by the beach or a disaster-prone area," says Mr Lawrence Wong, 28, a teacher and regular beach-goer who does not wish to subscribe to the service. "I've been to Bali four times and an earthquake happened when I was there once. But to me, there are bigger risks like being in an accident or getting robbed."

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PHOTO: REUTERS

RISING URGENCY: The tsunamis in July, which devastated Javanese coastal towns (above), and in December 2004, made Headline Marketing launch an SMS alert service (right).

