

The Japanese, who virtually balance on the brink of the next catastrophe, have seized the bull by the horns and made the general public fully aware of what they must do to save their lives in the event of a natural disaster. The "western" world has for the most part not acted with such foresight, not even travel arrangers whose destinations lie in geologically fragile regions. An exception during the Phuket tragedy was the English schoolgirl who had at her evidently good school learned what happens when a tsunami is nearing the shore. She saw the highly diagnostic retreat of the sea and immediately began to do her best to herd people to higher ground. Those who did not heed her entreaties perished, those who did, survived.



Edmund Naumann: the Mem official

Heinrich Edmund Naumann

Geologically, Japan is young. This was realized by the German geologist Heinrich Edmund Naumann (1854-1927) who during his 10 years in Japan mapped out the major tectonic zones, was the first professor of Geology in Japan (Tokyo University) and founded the Geological Survey of Japan and whose life was one of high hopes and thwarted enterprises (the interested can be referred to my article in *Terra Nova*, 1994, vol 6 and the book written with Katsumi Abe to wit *Chikyu-kagaku no Kyogi Tachi*: Tokai University Press, 1998, 1999 (reprinted)). He formulated the concept of Fossa Magna, the giant zone of structural weakness stretching across Honshu from Toyama to Izu Island and the history of which in 1999 was commemorated with the opening of the Fossa Magna Museum in Niigata. Naumann's name is well known to Japanese schoolchildren for his having discovered the remains of subfossil zō (=elephant) in Japan.

Can natural catastrophes be exactly forecasted? On extant knowledge I think not if one measures events in

terms of days and hours. It is within the realms of possibility that the occurrence of a major catastrophe will be foreseeable but not as to an exact point in time. Every time the likelihood of such an event is announced, and nothing really untoward takes place, the impact of a vaguely impending calamity lessens - like the boy who cried wolf once too often and, finally, most holiday-makers just will not bother. Following established procedure in Japan, tourists to danger zones should nevertheless be briefed by their tour operators in advance on what could occur and how to seek protection. And just as this note was finalised, we learn of a strong earthquake in the Indian Ocean exactly three months after the 26th of December 2004.

A similar kind of public education to the Japanese is sorely needed in the school curricula of "western" countries, all the more so since so many people now travel to exotic destinations around the globe of which a great number happen to be located in geologically unstable areas.

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