

THE RICHMOND NEWS

Upfront

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NATURAL DISASTER

Richmond protected against tsunami

Local impact of similar wave less severe than Asian disaster, expert predicts

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It was the worst tsunami disaster in human history. But could it happen here?

"The answer is yes," says Dr. John Clague of Simon Fraser University.

"The good news is it would not have the impact here that it did in (Asia)."

Clague gave the assurance at a forum on tsunamis at city hall Thursday. Roughly 300 people jammed council chambers and overflowed to a nearby committee room to hear Clague, an expert in natural disasters.

The tsunami that wiped out entire communities in Southeast Asia on Boxing Day killed 56,000 people.

The only other disasters that were comparable to the Dec. 26 wave include an earthquake that killed about 750,000 people in Tang Shan, China in 1976 and the eruption of Krakatoa in 1883, which killed 30,000 people, Clague said.

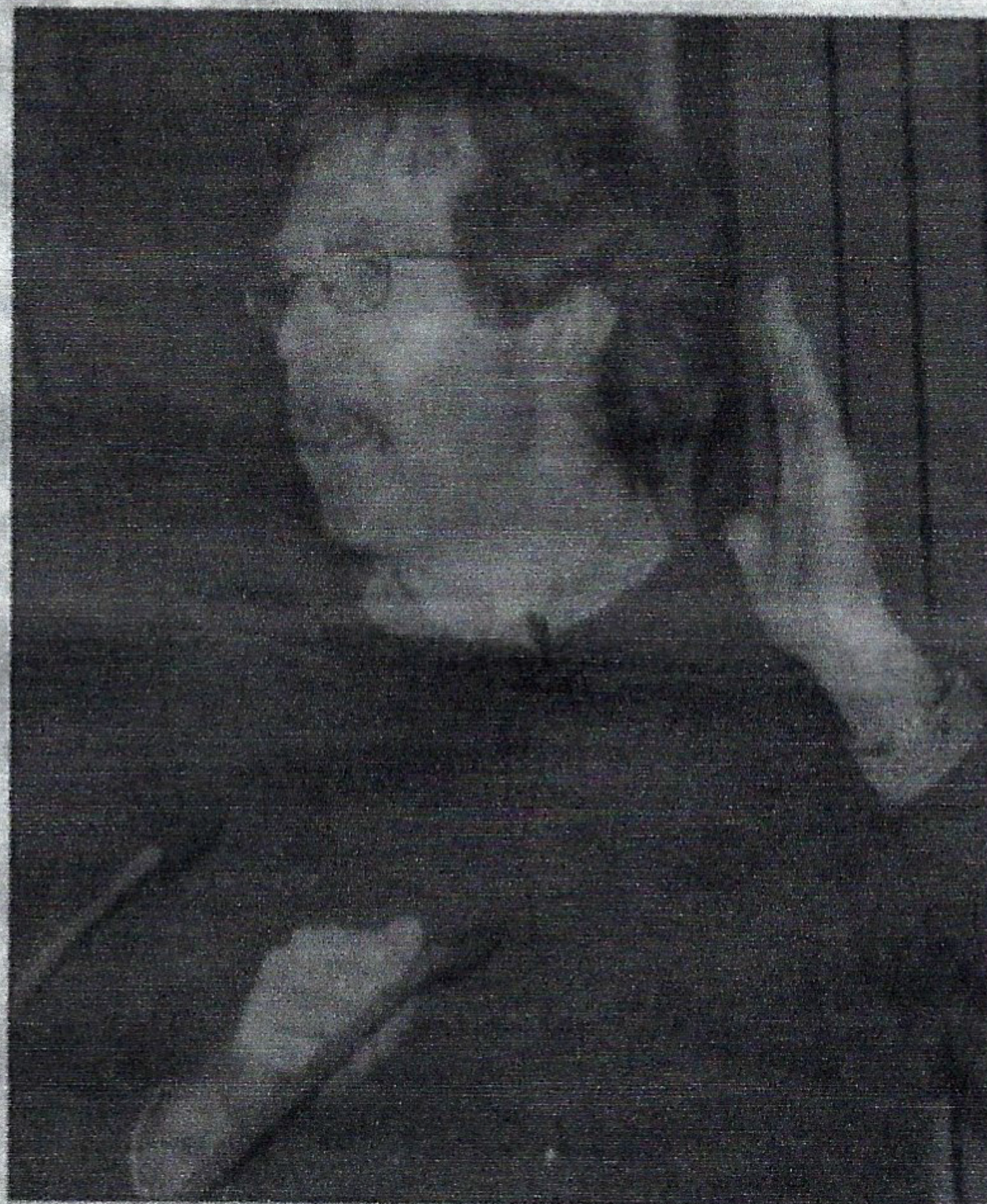
December's tsunami was triggered by an earthquake along a fault line off the coast of Sumatra that registered 9.0 on the Richter scale.

"That's about as big as earthquakes get," Clague said.

He added, that fault line is similar to the Cascadia subduction zone that runs from the coast of Vancouver Island to Northern California.

People who live in Tofino, Ucluelet, Port Alberni or any other coastal community that lies exposed to the open Pacific have good reason to be worried, Clague said, although, even there, the devastation from a tsunami is not expected to be anything like the one in Southeast Asia.

Fortunately for the Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island would take the brunt of a tsunami originating offshore.



NELSON BENNETT/RICHMOND NEWS

Dr. John Clague, Canada research chair with the Department of Earth Sciences at Simon Fraser University, spoke about the worst tsunami disaster in human history at a forum in Richmond Thursday night.

Even if a tsunami hit the B.C. coast at high tide, Richmond would be safe, Clague said.

"If it happened to occur at very high tides, you might get your feet wet, but there's not going to be catastrophic loss of life," he said.

As for modelling done by B.C. scientists that predicts underwater landslides could trigger local tsunamis, Clague doesn't buy it.

"There's no evidence of that having occurred in recent geological history," he said.

A magnitude-nine quake is statistically pre-

dicted to happen every 500 years, although no one knows exactly when one might occur.

Ironically, it is the medium-sized quakes of magnitude six or seven, with localized epicentres, that might cause the most damage here.

"You're not going to actually have loss of life from that," Clague said. "It's more of an issue of structural damage, than it is a threat to life."

Fire, in fact, may be the biggest concern, as John O'Sullivan pointed out Thursday night.

O'Sullivan is a distributor for QuakeKoso, a company that sells valves that automatically shut off gas during an earthquake.

Even a small earthquake could rupture gas lines and the resulting fires could be more of a threat than the earthquake itself.

In the event of an earthquake, or any other disaster, the city's emergency program would go into operation.

Asked what the city is doing to alert the public in the event of a disaster, Derrick Lim, emergency social services coordinator for the City of Richmond, said a consultant has been hired to provide answers to that question. He expects the city to have a draft recommendation by the end of next week.

Meanwhile, provincial and city emergency services personnel stressed the importance of taking individual responsibility.

Since emergency crews will likely be busy with immediate hazards, citizens should expect to be self sufficient for 72 hours.

One of the most important things to own is a battery-operated radio you can tune into in the event of an emergency.

Residents who want to know more about personal emergency preparedness may want to mark Jan. 31 on their calendars. On that date, the city will hold an emergency preparedness workshop. To register call 604-233-3333.