



Letter to Editor:

Structural Engineers Call for More Stringent Building Standards After Quake in Japan

The world has once again experienced a devastating earthquake and its ensuing tsunami and aftershocks. Our thoughts and prayers go out to those who lost their loved ones, their livelihoods and their homes in one of the largest earthquakes in Japan's history.

Earthquakes, unfortunately, are a natural occurrence and will continue to wreak havoc around the world until, as a world society, we require all buildings and other types of structures to be designed for appropriate earthquake ground shaking. Earthquakes will happen with greater frequency in countries around the Pacific Rim -- Japan, New Zealand, Chile and the West Coast of the United States -- known as the Ring of Fire. But they will also occur in less expected places like Haiti and the Midwest and Southern regions of the U.S.

As members of the structural engineering profession, we are doing our part to investigate and design better ways to build homes, schools, bridges, hospitals, dams and other infrastructure so they can withstand earthquakes and keep our communities functional after an earthquake. We have the technology. We have the trained professionals to do the job.

But now we need national and local governments around the world to join forces with us to secure the safety of our populations and cities. Officials in every country -- and those in the U.S. can set the example -- must develop more stringent building standards, codes, enforcement policies, and possibly consider penalizing building owners who don't comply. These officials, along with the insurance industry, must offer incentives to commercial and residential building owners to encourage them to retrofit old edifices and build earthquake-resistant structures. And lastly, our elected officials must assure all municipal buildings are meeting the highest standards including retrofitting those that are considered vulnerable to failure during an earthquake.

Japan currently has some of the most stringent building standards in the world and, more importantly, actively practices earthquake preparedness. If they hadn't, one can only imagine the additional loss of life and property that they would have incurred in this past earthquake.

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