

## Jo'burg firm in tsunami warning system

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By Paul Vecchiatto

Posted: 30 September 2005

Johannesburg-based PhiBlue Mobile Solutions is one of the key technology partners behind today's launch in Germany of a world tsunami alarm system, the company says.

The Tsunami Alarm System uses a network of computers to monitor seismic measuring stations and tsunami warning stations around the world. Once a verified tsunami alarm is generated, it is delivered by SMS to any destination with GSM mobile coverage.

PhiBlue Mobile Solutions became involved in the project earlier this year through its connections with consortium partner, Caribbean-based 3Mfuture, says PhiBlue director, William Ramwell. The other partners are Heindl Internet and the GeoSciences Centre in Potsdam in Germany.

A global tsunami alarm system was originally conceptualised by Eduard Heindl and Wolfram Reiners, both professors of applied sciences at the University of Furtwangen in Germany.

PhiBlue was commissioned to develop the message delivery system that uses Flash SMS technology to push the warning through, even if the cellphone is being used for a conversation, so that it has to be noticed, Ramwell says.

"Unlike hurricanes and similar weather phenomena, there can be no advance warning of earthquakes. With tsunamis, the warning window period can be from as little as 10 minutes to a few hours. With so little time available, the problem facing governments and agencies is how to quickly warn the people who are most likely to be affected," he says.

The answer lies in using the most commonly used handheld computer in the world – the GSM mobile phone, says Ramwell.

Disaster experts say many of the 300 000 deaths that occurred in the 26 December 2004 tsunami could have been prevented if the Indian Ocean states had some kind of warning system similar to that developed for Japan and the Hawaiian Islands.

While the Asia/Pacific region is most famous for its tsunamis, the phenomenon can happen almost anywhere at anytime. In 1908, for example, the Italian city of Messina was virtually destroyed and 75 000 people killed by an earthquake and the subsequent tsunami.

To receive the alarms, a subscription must be taken out at the Web site, <http://www.tsunami-as.com/>. Subscribing for one month costs 10 euros (R80) or an annual subscription is 30 euros. However, Ramwell says there are discussions about lowering the price for people who live in developing countries.

"We believe this extra insurance with the added peace of mind it provides can help win back visitors to the islands and resorts around the Indian Ocean," says Wolfram Reiners, director of 3Mfuture. "Tour guides should also be able to make use of the service to ensure the safety of their travel groups."

"If one is in one of those countries and sees a tourist suddenly look at his or her cellphone and start running up a hill, it may be wise to follow," says Ramwell.

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