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U.S. News

Mass hysteria mainly the stuff of Hollywood

Friday, February 14, 2003

By Michael Woods, Post-Gazette National Bureau

DENVER -- If the script for any future terrorist attacks play true, there will be none of the mass panic shown in disaster films, with people stampeding hysterically and trampling their own mothers.

More than 50 years of research on human behavior contradict "the panic myth," according to Lee Clarke of Rutgers University, an international authority on civil defense and community responses to disaster.

Research shows that people behave in catastrophes much like they do in ordinary life -- helping those nearby first before they help themselves, Clarke said. Empathy continues in the aftermath, with people cooperating to rebuild and recover emotionally.

"We have five decades of research on all kinds of disasters -- earthquakes, tornadoes, and airplane crashes. People rarely lose control," Clarke said, noting that human nature tends to shine brightest in adversity.

"Policymakers have yet to accept this. People are quite capable of following plans, even in the face of extreme calamities, but such plans must be there."

Clarke spoke yesterday at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, held this year in Denver. Founded in 1848, AAAS is the world's biggest general scientific organization with 134,000 members and affiliated

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groups representing 10 million scientists.

Thousands have gathered for the meeting, which will include hundreds of reports on new developments in everything from astronomy to zoology.

Clarke was among a panel of scientists considering how the government should plan for mass evacuations in case of an imminent asteroid impact.

Science advisers from the 30 member nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development are considering contingency plans, as well. Among them are evacuation of shoreline areas, since a touchdown in water could create a huge tidal wave.

One panelist advocated government secrecy if a warning would come too late and make no difference in the outcome. "If you can't do anything about a warning, then there is no point in issuing a warning at all," contended Geoffrey Sommer, of the Rand Corp., Santa Monica, California. "If an extinction-type impact is inevitable, then ignorance for the populace is bliss."

Clarke took a different tack. He said the evidence against the panic myth includes observations of how people behaved in the Sept. 11 World Trade Center attack, the atomic bombing of Japanese cities in World War II, nightclub fires, and other incidents. People escaping the World Trade Center, for instance, did not become hysterical or disregard the needs of others. They evacuated in an orderly fashion and often helped each other.

Clarke cautioned, however, that responses to future catastrophes would depend on individual circumstances, including how politicians, building managers, and other officials handle the situation. In an effort to avoid panic, for instance, officials may resort to placating language -- "everything is under control" -- hide information or issue statements that are obviously untrue or deceptive. The public usually responds well to bad news, so long as they regard authorities as trustworthy.

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