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The Bogus Missile Launch January 2018

On Saturday morning, January 13, 2018, Hawaiian residents were greeted by a terrifying Emergency Alert System message:



“The U.S. Pacific Command has detected a missile threat to Hawaii. A missile may impact on land or sea within minutes. This is not a drill. If you are indoors, stay indoors. If you are outdoors, seek immediate shelter in a building. Remain indoors well away from windows. If you are driving, pull safely to the side of the road and seek shelter in a building or lay on the floor. We will announce when the threat has ended. Take immediate action measures. This is not a drill.”

Emergency alert messages were posted on message signs along the highways. Many residents and visitors in Hawaii thought they were going to die.



As it turned out, there was no missile launch. This was a false alarm.

The Bogus Alert

The alert system is in place because of the close proximity of Hawaii to North Korea. Mobile phone users received the message at 8:07 AM local time.

The alert was corrected by email eighteen minutes later. However, there was no follow-up mobile text for 38 minutes. During this time, many Hawaiian residents waited to die from the missile strike.

The false alarm caused panic to turn to anger. Why was the alert sent? Why did it take 38 minutes for the Hawaiian government to correct it? In fact, the Hawaiian governor knew it was false within two minutes but didn't know his Twitter password in order to announce this.

How Did This Happen?

The alert was sent wrongly by an emergency system worker following an 8 AM shift change. An employee at Hawaii's Emergency Management Agency pushed the wrong button during procedures that occur

normally during a handover shift. He even clicked through a redundancy on the computer screen intended to act as a safeguard against such a mistake. The message was sent despite the onscreen prompt requesting confirmation.

What Is Being Done to Prevent a Recurrence?

Hawaii state officials were profusely apologetic. One of the problems was that the alert system did not allow for a correction to be sent quickly to mobile devices. Officials have promised that a cancellation template would be created.

A federal investigation into the bogus alert has been initiated. The government wants to ensure that such a false alarm never happens again.

Procedures have now been changed. Test messages as well as real alert messages will require a two-person verification to send the alerts.

However, it is recognized that North Korea's missile and nuclear program is a growing threat to Hawaii. Hawaii has now reintroduced its Cold War-era warning sirens.

The President's Response – Not

The bogus alert message sent White House aides scrambling. They frantically phoned various agencies to determine a response.

The cabinet has yet to test formal plans for how to respond to a domestic attack. Cabinet members have little idea what their role would be in such a scenario.

President Trump did not react publicly to the issue – he was playing golf. Hours later, he sent tweets focused on “fake news,” the “mainstream media,” and Michael Wolff's new book about him. He has yet to acknowledge the bogus alert.

On a Personal Note: How the False Alarm in Hawaii Impacted My Family

I have a nephew who lives on Oahu within spitting distance of Diamond Head. He called my sister - his mother - on Saturday to say a tearful goodbye. She was shopping near her home in Virginia and had no idea that a missile-imminent alert had been issued.

My nephew and his family were hunkered down in the bathroom. It was fifteen minutes of hell for her before he called her back to say it was a false alarm.

We may view the incident with well-deserved astonishment, but the human error in this case began not with the mistake of a single person but with the poorly defined procedures that other humans had put into place. It will be interesting to watch how future safeguards mitigate a repeat of my poor sister's minute-by-minute nightmare.

Summary

It is imperative that false alarms such as this not occur. Two-person verification will hopefully solve the problem. If such an alarm should be issued in the future, procedures must be in place to rapidly cancel the alert. Thirty-eight minutes until cancellation is simply not acceptable.

Acknowledgements

Material for this article was taken from the following sources:

The Terrifying Moment a Fake Missile Alert Interrupted Hawaiian TV, *The Daily Beast*; January 13, 2018.

'Wrong Button' Sent False Missile Alert to Hawaii, *The Daily Beast*; January 13, 2018.

White House scrambles after false missile warning in Hawaii, *Politico*; January 13, 2018.

Hawaii missile false alarm triggers shock, blame and apologies, *BBC*; January 14, 2018.

Hawaii missile alert test goes wrong, terrifies the state, *NBC News*; January 14, 2018.