

Seismic activity rises in California

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LOS ANGELES: Seismologists are unable to explain a marked recent increase in earthquake activity in Southern California.

There have been 70 quakes greater than magnitude 4.0 in Southern California and Baja California so far this year, the most of any year in the past decade. There were 30 last year and 29 in 2008.

Big earthquakes tend to occur in cycles, and experts have said the region has been in a quiet cycle in recent years.

The string of quakes this year raises the possibility that Southern California might again be entering a more active seismic period. Scientists said the increase did not mean the Big One was imminent, but it could mean more quakes were on the way.

Egill Hauksson, a geophysicist at the California Institute of Technology, said the rate of quakes in the region was "probably ... picking up again" after a relative lull that lasted more than 10 years.

"What it means is that we are going to have more earthquakes than in the average year. With more earthquakes, we're bound to have more bigger ones. But there are always fewer of those than the smaller ones."

Scientists, however, have not been able to identify reasons that fully explain the increase.

Many of the earthquakes this year have been aftershocks to a 7.2 temblor that rattled the Mexicali area earlier this month. The border region had experienced smaller quakes before the big one. And there have been more than 1000 aftershocks, including more than a dozen that registered higher than 5.0.

The Mexicali quake was the region's largest since one of 7.3 in the Mojave Desert in 1992. Despite their size, neither quake did catastrophic damage because they occurred in relatively remote areas far from large population centres.

In California, scientists say one of their biggest concerns remains the San Andreas fault, which has produced some of the state's largest earthquakes. Experts have said the San Andreas is overdue for an eruption. State officials have also often noted that only about one in six Californians has earthquake insurance.

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