



US plans storm warning system for East Africa

By FRANK JORDANS – 2 days ago

GENEVA (AP) — Cell phone users in East Africa will be able to receive warnings when a storm is brewing thanks to a low-cost alert system U.S. scientists are hoping to set up in the next few years, officials said Tuesday.

The NextStorm system — a computer program that analyzes recent satellite images to predict where thunderstorms are likely to occur in the next hour — should be in place by the end of the decade, said Jacqueline Schafer of USAID told journalists in Geneva.

The U.S. development agency has already set up a similar system set to begin operating this summer in Central America together with the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NASA and local partners.

Local officials will use the information to alert the population by radio, television and mobile text message.

The system does not replace longer-term forecasts warning of hurricanes and tropical storms, which can take days to reach full strength.

The weather images cost almost nothing to use, because they are already being gathered routinely by geostationary satellites. The text messages are also especially valuable in developing countries where many people have mobile phones but no fixed-line service.

This makes the alert system comparatively cheap to install compared with the sophisticated weather radars developed countries use.

Exact figures are difficult to come by, but Schafer estimated that the Panama center which covers Central America has so far cost NOAA and USAID about \$12 million.

Sometimes even moderate storms can cause millions of dollars in damage that could be reduced if residents get timely warnings to protect their livestock, secure their belongings and go indoors.

The new system in East Africa will also include facilities to map the spread of diseases

and other hazards.

So far 14 countries in the region have joined the project, which is being assisted by the Geneva-based Group on Earth Observations, known as GEO.

GEO director Jose Achache said the American system would be compatible with others currently being developed, including one Japan is working on to alert parts of Asia to imminent storms.

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