

Subject: CCNet: ALLEGED "METEORITE IMPACT" TRIGGERS PANIC, HEALTH FEARS IN PERU

Date: Wed, 19 Sep 2007 12:08:13 +0100

From: "Peiser, Benny" <B.J.Peiser@ljmu.ac.uk>

To: "cambridge-conference" <cambridge-conference@livjm.ac.uk>

CCNet 155/2007 - 19 September 2007

ALLEGED "METEORITE IMPACT" TRIGGERS PANIC, HEALTH FEARS IN PERU  
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Over the last few days, premature claims by government officials and premature speculations by scientists about an alleged "meteorite impact" in Peru have triggered fears and near mass hysteria among local residents who fear impending cosmic disaster and long-term health effects of a "boiling" crater. Many of the reported features of the crater ("boiling water," sulphurous fumes, etc) point to a geological mechanism of the crater formation. I would not be surprised if, after careful analysis, the alleged meteorite impact reveals itself to be just another "meteorwrong." After all, it would not be the first time that an alleged impact event turns out to be an urban legend fostered by premature announcements and uncritical media coverage.

--Benny Peiser, 19 September 2007

Small craters that might be interpreted as impact craters can in truth be hydrothermal explosion craters. In addition, hydrothermal explosion craters can be isolated features exhibiting no other surface evidence of hydrothermal activity.

--John H. Stewart and David J. Roddy, US Geological Survey, 2002

Scientists on Tuesday investigated a deep crater created by a meteorite strike in southeastern Peru that left 200 villagers sick from powerful fumes emanating from the crash site.

--AFP, 18 September 2007

Authorities said that the crater was made Saturday by a falling meteorite. Agence France Presse quoted a local official, Marco Limache, as saying that "boiling water started coming out of the crater, and particles of rock and cinders were found nearby."

--MSNBC, 18 September 2007

There is 'a lot of panic and fear because villagers are afraid that other space objects could fall.

--Nestor Quispe, mayor of Carancas, AFP 18 September 2007

Lots of people from the town of Carancas have fallen ill. They have headaches, eye problems, irritated skin, nausea and vomiting. I think there's also a certain psychological fear in the community.

--Nestor Quispe, mayor of Carancas, BBC News, 19 September 2007

A local journalist, Martine Hanlon, told the BBC that experts did not believe the meteor would make anybody sick, but they did think a chemical reaction caused by its contact with the ground could release toxins such as sulphur and arsenic.

--BBC News, 19 September 2007

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Subject: CCNet: MEDIA HYPE, MASS HYSTERIA AND METEORITES

Date: Thu, 20 Sep 2007 13:25:06 +0100

From: "Peiser, Benny" <B.J.Peiser@ljmu.ac.uk>

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CCNet 156/2007 - 20 September 2007 -- Audiatur et altera pars

MEDIA HYPE, MASS HYSTERIA AND METEORITES  
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Scientists doubt that the supposed meteorite strike that sickened some 200 residents of Peru last weekend actually involved anything from space. Based on reports of fumes emanating from the crater, some scientists

actually suspect that the event could have been some kind of geyser-like explosion rather than a meteorite impact. Several times in recent

history, reports of meteorite impacts have turned out to be untrue after

scientific examination. Doubt in the scientific community was as rampant today as the speculations out of Peru.

--Andrea Thompson, LiveScience, 19 September 2007

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Subject: CCNet: SCIENTIFIC CONSENSUS ON MAN-MADE OZONE HOLE MAY BE COMING APART

Date: Thu, 27 Sep 2007 11:29:56 +0100

From: "Peiser, Benny" <B.J.Peiser@ljmu.ac.uk>

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CCNet 161/2007 - 27 September 2007

(2) 'METEORITE' CRASH BREEDS MASS HYSTERIA  
Andrea Thompson, Space.com, 26 September 2007

(3) INITIAL REPORT ON THE CARANCAS METEORITE FALL, 15 SEPTEMBER 2007  
INGEMMET, 21 September 2007

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(2) 'METEORITE' CRASH BREEDS MASS HYSTERIA

Space.com, 26 September 2007

[http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/070926\\_meteorite\\_hysteria.html](http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/070926_meteorite_hysteria.html)

By Andrea Thompson

On what started as a normal Saturday night one week ago, residents of a small, remote Peruvian town saw a bright light streak across the sky, heard a resounding bang and suddenly found themselves at the center of a media frenzy.

Initial suspicions of an airplane crash quickly spiraled into widespread reports that a meteorite had plummeted to Earth and left a smoking, boiling crater whose supposedly noxious fumes were reported to have sickened curious locals who went to peer at the hole.

Despite doubts expressed by geologists that the crater was actually caused by a meteorite and firm explanations that a meteorite would not even emit fumes and that the "sickness" was likely a case of mass hysteria, numerous onlookers far and wide were fascinated by the idea that this event could be some real-life "Andromeda Strain" (the 1969 novel by Michael Crichton), where a mysterious rock falling to Earth from outerspace made anyone who went near it ill.

So what is it about things falling from the sky that fills us with such fear that we can make ourselves sick with panic?

Mass hysteria

Media reports of the number of locals afflicted by a "mysterious disease"-with symptoms such as nausea, headaches and sore throats-after visiting the crater figured in every news article about the Aug. 15 event, with some reporting that as many as 600 people had fallen ill.

But doctors who visited the site told the Associated Press they found no evidence that the crater had actually sickened such a large number of people.

If noxious fumes did emanate from the crater, they were most likely the result of a hydrothermal explosion that could have actually formed the crater, or were released from the ground when the meteorite struck, if in fact one did, according to many geologists.

Arsenic is found in the subsoil in that area of Peru and often contaminates the drinking water there, according to Peruvian geologists quoted on Sept. 21 by National Geographic News. Arsenic fumes released from the crater could have sickened locals who went to look, said one geologist who examined the site.

Some health officials suggest that the symptoms described by the locals, the large number of people reporting symptoms, and the apparently rapid spread have all the hallmarks of a case of mass hysteria.

"Those who say they are affected are the product of a collective psychosis," Jorge Lopez Tejada, health department chief in Puno, the nearest city, told the Los Angeles Times.

This psychosis could have begun as a result of fear of the meteorite and the mysterious "disease" on the part of the residents and spread as official and media reports seemed to confirm it and give it credence.

"The Peruvian event seems to be a rare case where we may be witnessing collective anxiety that is approaching near hysteria," said Benny Peiser, a social anthropologist at John Moores University in England.

"The major[ity] of the affected Peruvian town hinted that some of the mass anxiety is due to fear of imminent impacts and psychological stress which is not surprising given the premature speculation and media hype."

Fear of outer space

Fear of a meteorite impact is nothing new-humans have long looked to the heavens with a wary eye.

"The fear of cosmic disaster, in particular cometary impacts, has existed in all cultures for millennia," Peiser told SPACE.com

But the space age revealed just how many dangers, including comets, meteors, asteroids, and cosmic rays, await us in the final frontier.

"Only since the late 20th century, humankind has become aware of the risk posed by asteroids and comets," Peiser said. "Unfortunately, this risk has been wildly exaggerated by popular culture."

Our curiosity and fear of impact events has increased their coverage by the world media, Peiser says, which in turn has increased the number of meteorite impact reports, even when the evidence doesn't point that way.

"In recent years, there have been numerous cases where alleged meteorite falls were linked to mysterious explosions on the ground-only to be proven wrong," Peiser said. "One of the main reasons for the significant increase of such claims is almost certainly due to the growing media interest in the cosmic impact risk. It is part of human nature- and extremely tempting for the news media-to hype any event that initially looks mysterious."

While this fear is normal and understandable, it's been blown out of proportion so that the public thinks that impact risks are higher than they are, Peiser argues.

"Most people are simply not aware that we are making enormous progress in finding and identifying the population of Near Earth Objects and that the impact risk is thus diminishing year by year," Peiser said.

And when meteorites have struck, they have never carried any hint of some mysterious space disease.

"I don't know of any known record of a meteorite landing that emitted odors so noxious that people got sick from it," said geologist Larry Grossman of the University of Chicago.

So much for the Andromeda Strain.

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Griscom comment: Whether deliberate or unwitting, this "analysis" may serve as an effective cover-up of the crash of a satellite bearing a Pu-238 energy source, which surely would have sickened the villagers, many of them fatally.