YAHOO! NEWS

PRINT Back to story

2012 isn't the end of the world, Mayans insist

Associated Press

By MARK STEVENSON, Associated Press Writer
Sun Oct 11, 3:58 am ET

MEXICO CITY – Apolinario Chile Pixtun is tired of being bombarded with frantic questions about the Mayan calendar supposedly "running out" on Dec. 21, 2012. After all, it's not the end of the world.

Or is it?

Definitely not, the Mayan Indian elder insists. "I came back from England last year and, man, they had me fed up with this stuff."

It can only get worse for him. Next month Hollywood's "2012" opens in cinemas, featuring earthquakes, meteor showers and a tsunami dumping an aircraft carrier on the White House.

At Cornell University, Ann Martin, who runs the "Curious? Ask an Astronomer" Web site, says people are scared.

"It's too bad that we're getting e-mails from fourth-graders who are saying that they're too young to die," Martin said. "We had a mother of two young children who was afraid she wouldn't live to see them grow up."

Chile Pixtun, a Guatemalan, says the doomsday theories spring from Western, not Mayan ideas.

A significant time period for the Mayas does end on the date, and enthusiasts have found a series of astronomical alignments they say coincide in 2012, including one that happens roughly only once every 25,800 years.

But most archaeologists, astronomers and Maya say the only thing likely to hit Earth is a meteor shower of New Age philosophy, pop astronomy, Internet doomsday rumors and TV specials such as one on the History Channel which mixes "predictions" from Nostradamus and the Mayas and asks: "Is 2012 the year the cosmic clock finally winds down to zero days, zero hope?"

It may sound all too much like other doomsday scenarios of recent decades — the 1987 Harmonic Convergence, the Jupiter Effect or "Planet X." But this one has some grains of archaeological basis.

One of them is Monument Six.

Found at an obscure ruin in southern Mexico during highway construction in the 1960s, the stone tablet almost didn't survive; the site was largely paved over and parts of the tablet were looted.

It's unique in that the remaining parts contain the equivalent of the date 2012. The inscription describes

something that is supposed to occur in 2012 involving Bolon Yokte, a mysterious Mayan god associated with both war and creation.

However — shades of Indiana Jones — erosion and a crack in the stone make the end of the passage almost illegible.

Archaeologist Guillermo Bernal of Mexico's National Autonomous University interprets the last eroded glyphs as maybe saying, "He will descend from the sky."

Spooky, perhaps, but Bernal notes there are other inscriptions at Mayan sites for dates far beyond 2012 — including one that roughly translates into the year 4772.

And anyway, Mayas in the drought-stricken Yucatan peninsula have bigger worries than 2012.

"If I went to some Mayan-speaking communities and asked people what is going to happen in 2012, they wouldn't have any idea," said Jose Huchim, a Yucatan Mayan archaeologist. "That the world is going to end? They wouldn't believe you. We have real concerns these days, like rain."

The Mayan civilization, which reached its height from 300 A.D. to 900 A.D., had a talent for astronomy

Its Long Count calendar begins in 3,114 B.C., marking time in roughly 394-year periods known as Baktuns. Thirteen was a significant, sacred number for the Mayas, and the 13th Baktun ends around Dec. 21, 2012.

"It's a special anniversary of creation," said David Stuart, a specialist in Mayan epigraphy at the University of Texas at Austin. "The Maya never said the world is going to end, they never said anything bad would happen necessarily, they're just recording this future anniversary on Monument Six."

Bernal suggests that apocalypse is "a very Western, Christian" concept projected onto the Maya, perhaps because Western myths are "exhausted."

If it were all mythology, perhaps it could be written off.

But some say the Maya knew another secret: the Earth's axis wobbles, slightly changing the alignment of the stars every year. Once every 25,800 years, the sun lines up with the center of our Milky Way galaxy on a winter solstice, the sun's lowest point in the horizon.

That will happen on Dec. 21, 2012, when the sun appears to rise in the same spot where the bright center of galaxy sets.

Another spooky coincidence?

"The question I would ask these guys is, so what?" says Phil Plait, an astronomer who runs the "Bad Astronomy" blog. He says the alignment doesn't fall precisely in 2012, and distant stars exert no force that could harm Earth.

"They're really super-duper trying to find anything astronomical they can to fit that date of 2012," Plait said.

But author John Major Jenkins says his two-decade study of Mayan ruins indicate the Maya were aware of the alignment and attached great importance to it.

"If we want to honor and respect how the Maya think about this, then we would say that the Maya viewed 2012, as all cycle endings, as a time of transformation and renewal," said Jenkins.

As the Internet gained popularity in the 1990s, so did word of the "fateful" date, and some began worrying about 2012 disasters the Mayas never dreamed of.

Author Lawrence Joseph says a peak in explosive storms on the surface of the sun could knock out North America's power grid for years, triggering food shortages, water scarcity — a collapse of civilization. Solar peaks occur about every 11 years, but Joseph says there's evidence the 2012 peak could be "a lulu."

While pressing governments to install protection for power grids, Joseph counsels readers not to "use 2012 as an excuse to not live in a healthy, responsible fashion. I mean, don't let the credit cards go up."

Another History Channel program titled "Decoding the Past: Doomsday 2012: End of Days" says a galactic alignment or magnetic disturbances could somehow trigger a "pole shift."

"The entire mantle of the earth would shift in a matter of days, perhaps hours, changing the position of the north and south poles, causing worldwide disaster," a narrator proclaims. "Earthquakes would rock every continent, massive tsunamis would inundate coastal cities. It would be the ultimate planetary catastrophe."

The idea apparently originates with a 19th century Frenchman, Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, a priest-turned-archaeologist who got it from his study of ancient Mayan and Aztec texts.

Scientists say that, at best, the poles might change location by one degree over a million years, with no sign that it would start in 2012.

While long discredited, Brasseur de Bourbourg proves one thing: Westerners have been trying for more than a century to pin doomsday scenarios on the Maya. And while fascinated by ancient lore, advocates seldom examine more recent experiences with apocalypse predictions.

"No one who's writing in now seems to remember that the last time we thought the world was going to end, it didn't," says Martin, the astronomy webmaster. "There doesn't seem to be a lot of memory that things were fine the last time around."
