

# Up to 6,000 killed by PNG tidal wave

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An estimated 6,000 people, most of them children and the elderly, have died after a tsunami tidal wave devastated 13 coastal villages in Papua New Guinea's remote West Sepik province last Friday night. Initial news reports indicated few casualties, but local church officials say the death toll will reach 6,000, or almost two-thirds of the local population.

Surviving eye-witnesses reported that the villages were hit in quick succession by three 10-metre waves, just after nightfall at 7.20pm on Friday. Tsunami, a Japanese word meaning harbour wave, are generated by undersea earthquakes and travel at high speed in deep ocean conditions. In this case, the tidal waves were created by a quake, measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale, only 20 kilometres offshore. The waves hit a 30-kilometre section of the shoreline within 30 minutes.

Three villages were destroyed entirely -- Nimas, Arop, Warapu -- with extensive damage to Sissano, Malol and Aitape and seven other villages. All inhabitants of Long Island, a small island, were killed. It is believed that only 600 survived at Warapu, a village of 3,500.

Villagers were picked up and flung, along with tons of debris, into the coastal jungle or swept into coastal lagoons. Hundreds of children, who had just returned to their villages for term holidays from the regional high school in Vanimo, died. Among the victims were 200 children from Aitape, holidaying at one of the coastal villages.

Rescue workers reported finding hundreds of bodies in debris-choked lagoons, mangrove swamps and low-lying coastal jungle. Many of the dead were buried in shallow graves near where they were found in an effort to prevent the spread of disease and wild animals devouring the corpses. Mass graves are being dug in Aitape for those who survived the tsunami but have since succumbed to their wounds, shock and infections.

The media have emphasised the unpredictability of tsunamis. While it is not possible to precisely forecast earthquakes and tsunamis, the West Sepik region and neighbouring areas lie in close proximity to regular earthquake and volcanic activity. Despite this, emergency health care, disaster relief, basic communications and transport facilities are non-existent in the area. Communications are so primitive that it took 13 hours for news of the disaster to be relayed to Port Moresby, the PNG capital.

All health services in the West Sepik, including the only district hospital in Aitape, had been halted by government budget cuts. Hastily reopened, the hospital only had one doctor and was completely incapable of dealing with the hundreds of casualties. Patients were taken by helicopter to Vanimo, where the poorly equipped 60-bed hospital was quickly overwhelmed. Survivors died on the hospital's floor or outside on thin foam mattresses. The nearest hospital with a surgeon was kilometres away in Wewak, capital of neighbouring East Sepik province. It also has only a handful of beds. Medical staff reported that supplies of blood, antibiotics and organic drips were quickly exhausted.

Scores of the injured have died due to lack of any medical attention and the most basic drugs and other supplies. Many with relatively minor injuries - broken bones and flesh wounds - have contracted serious infections and died. With thousands of bodies rotting in the tropical heat, there is a serious danger that survivors will die from cholera, hepatitis, or other diseases.

PNG military helicopters and civilian pilots called in to ferry seriously injured survivors, could not cope. 'If we had 50 helicopters yesterday we could have saved another 100 lives or so,' one Aitape resident told a television news crew.

Australian military personnel and aid workers were not sent to the region until late Sunday afternoon,

almost three days after the catastrophe. Only four Hercules aircraft, a field hospital and 100 personnel have been dispatched, the last plane leaving as late as Monday afternoon. The Howard government has not sent any military helicopters to the area, even though elite Blackhawk units are only five hours away at Townsville. So far, the governments of PNG, Australia and New Zealand have devoted just \$2 million between them to the disaster operation.

This catastrophe takes place as PNG's people attempt to recover from the worst drought in fifty years. It has killed over 500 people and left 1.2 million of the country's 4 million people in desperate need of food and water. The Asian economic meltdown has further hit the economy, with national output declining 3 percent over the past 12 months.

Editorials have praised the minimal aid being provided by the Australian and New Zealand governments. But PNG's inability to cope with the tragedy, the drought and other catastrophes that constantly beset its people is the direct result of decades of exploitation by Australian companies and mining multinationals.

PNG has some of the world's largest gold deposits, massive copper mining operations, as well as rich deposits of oil, silver and other minerals; but none of this wealth is used to provide adequate health care, education or other basic needs. Consecutive Australian governments, as well as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, have forced PNG governments to cut social spending. This guarantees that the human toll caused by such disasters is drastically compounded.



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