

Solomon Islands: tsunami causes humanitarian disaster

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At least 30 people are confirmed to have died in Solomon Islands after a massive earthquake measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale triggered a tsunami, which struck the western part of the country on Monday morning. The final death toll may be significantly higher and more than 5,000 are believed to be homeless. The Solomon Islands government has appealed for international assistance and declared a state of emergency for the Western and Choiseul Provinces and the northern part of Isabel Island.

The initial earthquake raised alarms from Tokyo to Hawaii, and officials closed beaches on the east coast of Australia, some of them more than 2,000 kilometres away from the quake's epicentre. The tsunami, however, caused no significant destruction outside the Solomons, although a family of five was killed in neighbouring Papua New Guinea's Milne Bay Province. Solomon Islands—a small and impoverished nation of about half a million people living on more than 200 islands—now faces a humanitarian disaster. Thousands of people are homeless and experiencing critical shortages of food, water, and medical supplies.

The extent of the damage remains unknown, as the tsunami struck a number of remote islands where communication infrastructure is virtually non-existent. Some of the affected villages had relied upon two-way radios to communicate with the outside world. The tsunami struck the island of Ghizo in the New Georgia archipelago and submerged the Solomons' second-largest town, Gizo, 41 kilometres from the epicentre. Widespread destruction arrived within five minutes of the earthquake. Waves estimated at nearly 5 metres (16 feet) high inundated buildings and destroyed coastal homes. Video footage shows boats washed ashore hundreds of metres from the coastline.

From Gizo alone, 4,000 people are camping on a hill behind the town, and of these about half are reportedly homeless. National Disaster Management Office media

liaison officer Julian Makaa said more than 900 houses around Gizo had been destroyed. According to Fred Fakarii, chairman of the National Disaster Management Council, disaster teams flying over the area reported that “destruction was massive and widespread”.

Western Province, the area hardest hit, consists of scores of low-lying islands. It is likely that many people had no possibility of avoiding the tsunami. Robert Iroga, editor of the *Solomon Star*, said that he had received reports that one island close to the provincial airport had been fully covered by the wave. According to other press reports, at least 13 villages were entirely wiped out. Reports from People First Internet stations around Western Province have named South Choiseul, Taro, Sasamunga and Pangoe as among the affected areas.

The tsunami survivors face immediate dangers. In the tropics, injuries can quickly become infected, and those forced to live without shelter risk contracting malaria. Disease is already affecting people, with the Red Cross reporting that a number of children from Gizo have diarrhoea. On Wednesday the Solomons' government warned that survivors in remote villages may not receive any assistance until Friday. Damage to Ghizo Island's airfield and harbours is making it hard for supplies to reach the area.

Many people are reportedly too frightened to move from their isolated hillside shelters because of strong aftershocks, including a tremor on Wednesday which registered 6 on the Richter scale.

“How do we know that it is safe to go back down the hill?” Barbara Rigieo asked the *Australian*. “My children are too scared. Our home is broken. I can see from up here that it is falling down. I can't go back now. We were lucky. The earthquake shook us for about 15 minutes—on and off—as we prepared breakfast and then I saw the ocean level fall. I knew something was wrong. I was able to get my kids and run for the hills and about five minutes later

the waves came. Others were not able to get away. We watched as homes were slowly carried by the water and then we saw the people and the animals go out to sea.”

At least 2,000 people are living in makeshift camps near Gizo without any emergency supplies including, in many cases, shelter. “There’s no water to wash, no water to drink,” Esther Zekele told Associated Press. She fled with her husband and five children and had only a sack of rice to live on. She had seen no aid workers.

The population in the western regions of the Solomons will need long-term economic and social support. Most people live as subsistence farmers. Their plots have been destroyed and the wells that supply water have been contaminated.

The response of the major regional powers, Australia, New Zealand and the US, is grossly inadequate. Canberra has pledged \$A2 million (\$US1.6 million) in assistance while Wellington has said it will contribute half that amount. The US has offered a miserable \$US250,000.

The Howard government has promised additional aid if required. “In addition to the two million dollars that has already been committed in aid and, of course, Australia’s ongoing military support to the country of Solomon Islands, we also, of course, take account of the requests that are put to us by the Solomon Islands’ government and the assessment on the ground,” Defence Minister Brendan Nelson said.

This posturing belies the real record of Canberra’s disinterest in the well-being of ordinary Solomon Islanders. In December 2002, for example, the Howard government refused to offer any direct assistance to 1,300 people made homeless by a severe tropical storm and brazenly denied there was a humanitarian situation even as people were forced to take emergency shelter in caves. The final aid contribution made in response to the tsunami crisis will be determined not by the humanitarian situation on the ground, but rather by political and strategic calculations in Canberra.

The “military support” Nelson mentioned is a reference to the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which took over the country’s state apparatus in 2003. Hundreds of police, soldiers, and bureaucratic officials were dispatched as part of Canberra’s neo-colonial operation. In recent months, Howard and his ministers have been engaged in a ferocious campaign aimed at unseating the government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, which it views as an obstacle to its control over the country.

The tsunami has again exposed the Howard

government’s claim that the operation, codenamed “Helping a friend”, was driven by concern for the welfare of the Solomons’ people. While hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent bolstering the police, courts, and prison systems, nothing has been done to alleviate the widespread poverty and unemployment afflicting the country. Basic services throughout the Solomon Islands such as transport, communications, electricity, and water are grossly inadequate and in remote islands non-existent.

The tsunami casualty rate was exacerbated by the absence of the communications infrastructure needed to warn people of the dangers following the earthquake. The Solomons receives briefings from the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Honolulu but is unable to immediately pass on vital information to the population. A vastly higher death toll was averted primarily because people saw the coastal waters receding and, recognising this as a sign of an impending tsunami, took flight. If the tsunami had occurred at night, a far greater tragedy would have occurred.

US earthquake expert Kerry Sieh questioned the value of the multi million-dollar warning systems installed after the 2004 Asian tsunami, claiming that the destruction in Gizo demonstrated the difficulties in issuing warnings when tsunamis strike so soon after an earthquake. However, Michael Rottmann, the UN special coordinator for the early warning system in Indonesia, noted that warning systems are highly valuable if the message gets out quickly. “I think a lot of lives can be saved if you have a warning in less than 10 minutes,” he told Associated Press. “If you have five minutes and you have a reliable warning, you can get very far up into a hill or away from the beach.”

Australia’s RAMSI authorities apparently made no effort to implement a tsunami alert mechanism in the Solomons, despite the terrible lesson inflicted by the 2004 tsunami and even though Solomon Islands lies on the Pacific Basin’s so-called Ring of Fire. Ninety percent of the world’s earthquakes occur along this “ring”. The absence of any contingency plans demonstrates the contempt with which Canberra and the major powers hold ordinary Solomon Islanders.



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