

# Regional powers provide a pittance in aid to tsunami victims in Solomon Islands

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The response of the Australian and New Zealand governments to the humanitarian crisis in Solomon Islands underlines their callous indifference toward the people of the Pacific island states. A massive earthquake triggered a tsunami on April 2, devastating much of the Western and Choiseul provinces and causing a series of landslides on Ranongga Island. Thousands of people have been displaced, leaving them vulnerable to disease and food shortages.

Canberra is intent on understating the depth of the suffering. Interviewed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on April 14, Australian High Commissioner Peter Hooton said: "I have the impression that the relief effort is in pretty good shape, and that certainly coordination has improved over the course of this operation."

This is to pass off the Howard government's miserly approach as a genuine response to the tsunami disaster. Canberra is prepared to spend hundreds of millions of dollars defending its strategic and economic interests in the Solomons, but remains indifferent to the welfare of ordinary people. So far, the Howard government has contributed just \$3 million toward the relief effort.

By contrast, \$850 million has been allocated for 2005-09 to finance the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which in 2003 took control over the key institutions of the state—the prisons, the police and the finance ministry.

Lisa Cescon, head of World Vision New Zealand, gave a far more accurate picture of the situation: "We're talking about thousands of people living almost on top of each other in makeshift camps with no immediate facilities at their disposal."

While estimates of the numbers still homeless vary, it is clear that in the Western and Choiseul provinces,

thousands of people are still living in squalid camps on high ground. They include some whose homes were not destroyed, but who are too traumatised to return.

The United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team estimated that 9,000 people were displaced after the tsunami. The Solomon Islands government said at least 50,000 people were affected. A government spokesperson, Alfred Maesulia, says about 5,000 people are still homeless. *Save the Children* carried out a preliminary basic needs and child protection assessment in various villages across Western Province and reported a total affected population of 5,781.

News of the catastrophe has virtually disappeared from the media. But reports on the ground show that large numbers of people are not obtaining systematic medical and psychological assistance. For those in the camps there is no social infrastructure in place. The usual ills of living in close proximity with a lack of sanitation—diarrhea, malaria and sores and cuts that do not heal—are threatening to take hold.

Choiseul Province Premier Jackson Kiloe has expressed anger over the tardiness of the emergency response. Kiloe said that by April 5, three days after the tsunami struck, no assistance had reached his province.

The slow pace of the relief effort has produced claims of unfairness in the distribution of food and provisions. Methodist Church leader, Reverend Armstrong Pitakaji, denounced an "injustice to the survivors in Choiseul province," claiming that "all the emergency supplies have been heavily concentrated in the Western province".

As of April 11, 4,000 survivors in Sasamunga village in Choiseul province were still in desperate need of emergency supplies. The tsunami travelled 500 metres inland, killing four people and destroying homes, the

village hospital and schools. Pitakaji said: “In this village, 95 percent of the population is camping on hilltops and very few have tarpaulins and when rain pours none of us sleeps well at night.”

Dr Penny Fletcher, from St Vincent’s Hospital in Sydney, coordinated the medical response in Gizo, the capital of Western province. In an Australian Associated Press report on April 11, she expressed shock at the situation. With only a few staff, she was trying to treat seriously injured patients using tarpaulins as shelter.

“The way I ended up getting a helicopter was by asking the people who were strong to lift the patients up on their own bed, carry them down, put them on a marquee in front of the police station and allow everyone to see the horror of it,” she said.

“These people have food problems, water problems, no shelter, no employment,” she told reporters. “It’s not over. Malaria, dysentery, are going to be the next killers. Homelessness, social issues with the children having no homes—there are major, major issues ahead and I want Australians to realise that even when the drama of it is out of the news, there are going to be hundreds more dead. There are chronic problems that have developed from this acute situation.”

In an April 19 article on *ReliefWeb*, Michael Teirara, an agriculture extension officer in Western province, said many of the camps he visited on Vella Lavella island were yet to receive basic requirements for survival. Items such as tents, mosquito nets and medicine were either running out or had not yet reached the island. More than half of the island’s 15,000 people had been displaced.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare has played down the extent of the crisis, seeking to quell popular anger. His spokesman, Alfred Maesulia, said: “One of the messages the Prime Minister is trying to bring to the people is ... don’t believe in any rumors that they hear ... the government will help them in their time of trouble”.

It should not, however, be left to the impoverished Solomons’ government to assist the affected population. In addition to emergency supplies, which may be required for six months, the rebuilding of infrastructure is a major task.

The Asian Development Bank’s assessment of the damage stated that 26 bridges in Choiseul and eight in

Gizo needed replacing, while 30 kilometres of road required repair. This did not take into account the destruction of homes, schools and hospitals. According to the Western Province government, the repair bill in Gizo alone would amount to \$200 million.

Yet none of the major countries have offered anything approaching what will be required to rebuild the shattered infrastructure. The Solomon Islands is not an isolated case. It should be noted that at the start of 2007, two years on from the devastation caused by the Asian tsunami, 60 percent of those whose homes were destroyed still live in temporary housing. Only half of the pledged \$13 billion in aid had been spent.

The response of the Australian and New Zealand governments to the plight of the latest victims in the Solomons Island speaks volumes about their claims to be concerned about the well being of the country’s people. Like their other interventions in the Pacific, the RAMSI operation is to further the economic and strategic interests of the two regional powers at the expense of the local population.



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