

Tsunami hits several South Pacific countries

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A tsunami of six-metres or higher, followed by several smaller waves, hit the South Pacific islands of American Samoa, Samoa, and Tonga on Tuesday morning. Around 140 people are dead, many more are missing, and at least 1,000 people have been displaced. The toll is sure to increase as several remote, cut-off villages have been destroyed.

In some places, the wave penetrated two kilometres inland. Among those reported dead, most are elderly people and children. The tsunami also hit several tourist resorts, with four Australians among those killed in Samoa.

The tsunami was caused by a massive earthquake that lasted 90 seconds and measured 8.3 on the Richter scale. It struck at a depth of 85 kilometres at 6.48 a.m. local time, just over 200 kilometres south-west of Samoa's capital, Apia. A subsequent tremor measuring 5.6 on the Richter scale came 20 minutes later.

The tsunami hit the harbour of the American Samoan capital, Pago Pago. Radio broadcaster Joey Cummings told the BBC that as he watched from a balcony, a giant wave struck, and "the air was filled with screams". He said a "river of mud" carried trees, cars, buses and boats past his building.

The eastern coast of American Samoa's Tutuila Island appears to be the worst affected. Tutuila resident Faalua Tauai spoke to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "About three to four villages got destroyed by the tsunami. The ocean came, it flooded all over, the ocean came right away, right on the road and then people got evacuated."

The Hawaii-based Pacific Disaster Centre has warned that Tutuila Island may now be hit by landslides due to the steep nature of the terrain.

In Samoa, Apia was badly damaged, with the remains of buildings and vehicles strewn everywhere. Olga Keil, a Samoa-based journalist, described the damage: "We've got

reports from the south-eastern side of the main island, where houses have been completely flattened; vehicles have been swept out to sea, boulders that have fallen off the mountain along the coastal areas. But mainly a lot of houses in the villages on the coastal areas have been flattened by the waves."

Very little information is available about the situation in Tonga, except that the hardest hit area was the northern island of Niuatoputapu, close to Samoa. The *Australian* reported that a number of four metre waves struck the island, and that up to five percent of buildings there were destroyed. Large waves hit Fiji and the Cook Islands but no significant damage was reported.

Many local residents and journalists who have seen the affected areas compared the destruction wrought with images broadcast in 2004 in the aftermath of the Boxing Day tsunami that killed more than 200,000 people in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand. That disaster was clearly on a far larger scale than the one which hit the South Pacific Tuesday. The waves in the Indian Ocean were almost twice as high as those which hit Samoa, American Samoa, and Tonga. The Pacific islands are also far less densely populated than the Asian areas hit by the Boxing Day tsunami.

Another difference is that whereas there was no tsunami detection and warning system in the Indian Ocean, the Pacific has an extensive network of tide gauges and other technologies to detect possible tsunamis. The Indian Ocean alert system established in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami only became active in June 2006. The Pacific Rim is a highly unstable geological area, known as the Ring of Fire, with frequent earthquakes and tsunamis.

While details are still emerging, it appears that no effective warnings were issued to Pacific Islanders in the relatively short time between the earthquake and when the tsunami struck. According to one report, tide gages monitored by the Hawaii-based Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre indicate that

after the initial warning was issued, giant waves hit Pago Pago within eight minutes and Apia within 28 minutes. Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi said that a warning had been issued over the radio, but many villagers were oblivious to the impending disaster. Samoan Deputy Prime Minister Misa Telefoni said islanders had no warning.

Many survivors reported that they were not aware of any danger until the moment before the tsunami struck. Ngutu, a resident of seaside village Ulutogia, in the Aleipata region, which was completely obliterated, told the ABC that “everyone was just walking around normal, after the earthquake, curious about what was going to happen, kids were going to school” before a deadly wave “as tall as the sky” hit.

The Pacific Island countries are among the most impoverished in the world, with their majority rural populations living in low-lying and isolated coastal villages, which often lack basic social infrastructure, including telephone communications. It is unclear what mechanisms, if any, were in place to quickly alert villagers about any warnings issued by the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre.

University of NSW geographer Dr Alec Thornton, who has studied Samoa’s economic and social development, told the ABC that the national government had put in place a national tsunami plan after the 2004 Asian disaster. He said this plan involved boosting coastline defences around vulnerable coastal villages, installing alert sirens in the capital, and alerting mobile phones. Nevertheless, Dr Thornton stressed: “Despite the thoroughness and complexity of the plan they implemented four years ago now, I’m not sure how prepared the government would be to evacuate people living along these coastal zones. It would have severely challenged the government to respond quickly to evacuate the people in affected areas.”

An adequate alert system for every village and urban centre in the Pacific—involving phone, radio, and siren alert systems integrated into the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre alert network—would require a level of investment beyond the means of the tiny Pacific countries, many of which are facing a severe economic crisis. The major regional powers, Australia and New Zealand, have failed to take any action—neglect being typical of Canberra’s and Wellington’s attitude towards the people of the Pacific.

The absence of adequate alert mechanisms in Samoa, American Samoa, and Tonga stood in contrast with the

warning system in place in New Zealand. Authorities there issued a public tsunami alert at 7.15 a.m., triggering evacuation procedures on coastal areas. Residents in low-lying areas of the Coromandel Peninsula and Northland on the North Island were told to move to higher ground. The alert was later cancelled after only a small wave hit the country.

The major regional powers have announced emergency aid packages in response to the humanitarian disaster. President Barack Obama declared a “major disaster” in American Samoa, a US overseas territory, and pledged a “full, swift and aggressive response”. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) dispatched two disaster recovery teams to affected areas to assess the damage. A US Navy frigate with supplies is on its way.

Canberra deployed doctors and medical experts on a chartered plane as well as disaster relief supplies on a RAAF Hercules jet. The New Zealand air force is also transporting supplies, while police experts in body identification have also been sent. The Australian government has announced an initial aid package to Samoa worth \$2 million and said more assistance may be made available to Samoa and other affected countries. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd declared: “We see our friends in Samoa as part of our Pacific family and, therefore, when natural disaster strikes, Australia has always stood ready ... to assist them in times of difficulty and need.”

Previous experience demonstrates that such commitments count for nothing. For example, another member of what Rudd cynically refers to as Australia’s “Pacific family”, the Solomon Islands, was hit by a tsunami in April 2007, and despite Australian government promises, is yet to receive sufficient funds to fix Gizo town’s roads, wharves, and water and sanitation systems. Five years after the devastating Asian tsunami of 2004, many of the victims in affected countries are still waiting for much needed assistance, despite the effusive promises by Australia, New Zealand, the US and other countries. Those that have received aid have simply been returned to the same impoverished conditions that existing prior to the disaster.



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