

Pacific tsunami relief efforts grossly inadequate

Tom Peters
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The death toll from the September 29 earthquake and tsunami, which struck the small Pacific island states of Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga, is continuing to rise, as the extent of the destruction becomes more apparent. So far 170 people have been confirmed dead—129 in Samoa, 32 in American Samoa and nine on the Tongan island of Niuatoputapu. An unknown number of people are still missing in Samoa and two are missing in American Samoa. Hundreds have been injured, with Samoan hospitals reportedly overflowing.

In absolute terms the numbers are small compared to the death toll in the earthquake that hit the Indonesian island of Sumatra less than a day later. However, per capita, the level of destruction wrought by the Pacific tsunami is enormous. In Samoa, according to a government estimate, 32,000 of the country's 180,000 inhabitants have been affected, through the loss of relatives, injury, or by the loss of their homes, vehicles or food crops. Some 20 villages have been virtually flattened along the south coast of Upolu, the main island of Samoa, and scores more have been destroyed on Tutuila, in American Samoa. Thousands have been left homeless in both islands. Coastal homes on the small island of Manono, near Upolu, were also destroyed. On Niuatoputapu, an isolated island with little infrastructure and a population of less than a thousand, around 194 homes and the island's health clinic were destroyed.

Although the tsunami hit the islands minutes after the initial 8.3 magnitude earthquake, some residents have criticised the authorities in Apia and Pago Pago for failing to provide any effective public warning. Initial reports suggest that the Hawaii-based Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a warning to governments across the Pacific as soon as the quake struck, leaving a window of between 8 and 28 minutes for local warnings to be issued. Reverend Uaea Isaraelu, from the Samoan village of Saleapaga, told Radio New Zealand International that 30 lives could have been saved had his village received a warning, as there was a 10-minute gap between the tremor and the first tidal wave. Yet the only public warning issued was in the form of a radio broadcast.

Aid workers, medical teams, police and military search teams have arrived in Samoa, mainly from New Zealand and Australia. In American Samoa, relief operations are being overseen by the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Despite persistent claims from high-ranking officials in each country that everything possible is being done to assist survivors, many have been forced to spend the past week in appalling conditions, some with barely any contact with relief or health workers.

On the island of Manono, villagers spent at least four days in virtual isolation. A woman who contacted the *Samoa Observer* on Saturday said electricity had been cut off and water tanks had been smashed by the tsunami. "We don't have water now," she said. "Those water tanks were our source of drinking water. We're sitting here, not knowing what to do. We need help."

The tiny island's wharf was damaged and boats were flung inland, preventing them from leaving for Upolu. Luckily the day after the tsunami, Harry Lee, a resident of Upolu who was concerned about the fate of the islanders, set out in a boat to deliver some basic supplies. It is the only outside assistance they received. On Sunday, the *Observer* reported: "There is a worry for health of survivors. Dysentery is beginning to be a problem due to drinking unsafe water, damaged septic systems, and lack of toilets."

On Upolu, thousands of people who fled into the mountains to escape the tsunami were still camping there as of Monday, too traumatised to return to their destroyed villages and unsure where to find help. One group of 49 people, from the devastated village of Utufaalafa, formed a makeshift camp deep in the bush, where all slept for several nights under the same tarpaulin. The group was visited by aid workers, who left them a portable toilet but apparently nothing else, according to the *New Zealand Herald*. At least one member of the group, Elisa Tuiuli, is suffering from flu and others have "untreated wounds that are at risk of infection and blood poisoning that could result in death."

While the Samoan government certainly bears its share of responsibility for the lack of services and disaster planning, the tiny island state desperately needs help to cope with a disaster of this magnitude—above all, from the major regional powers.

In the first days following the tsunami, volunteers and officials expressed their frustration and anger at the lack of foreign assistance. Vaughan Simpson, a volunteer worker helping to recover bodies from the wreckage at Lalomanu village, told the *Dominion Post* on October 3: “We’re just a handful of people, some of us don’t have a clue how to do this work, it is hard and specialist work,” he said. “It’s unbelievable, where are the Australian and New Zealand army units, right now, today? We have bodies decaying right around us, and we need help. We need cadaver dogs right now. Just what is New Zealand doing?”

Samoan Fire Commissioner Tony Hill, who was in charge of the search at Lalomanu, also told the paper: “We haven’t got enough people.”

The aid provided by Australia and New Zealand is clearly insufficient. Understaffed and ill-equipped Samoan hospitals are filled to overflowing. On Monday, Samoa’s National Health Service general manager bluntly told reporters: “In a few weeks, we will see many people sick with gastroenteritis and diarrhoea. That will affect the young and the elderly. Deaths are inevitable.”

Prospects for those stranded on Niuatoputapu are bleak. Villagers left homeless and without medical supplies had to wait two days before emergency aid finally arrived and four seriously wounded people were evacuated. Damage to the island’s airstrip prevented planes from landing earlier. Food, clothing and tents have since been delivered to the island by a French frigate, but the *New Zealand Herald* reported: “Clean water remains a critical issue. Storage tanks are either unusable or were destroyed.”

In American Samoa, where the death toll is significantly lower, FEMA reports that power has been restored to most of the main island. Nearly 4,000 are in emergency shelters. As in Samoa, large numbers have been left to fend for themselves. Residents of Amanave, the first village in American Samoa to be hit by the tsunami, told reporters on Monday that they have received no relief and have been struggling to survive over the past five days, sleeping outside or in makeshift shelters. Almost every house in the village was destroyed, and conditions were so unbearable that most of its 500 residents left the area to try and find assistance elsewhere. Only about 20 remained behind. It is unclear whether any died in the tsunami.

The full cost of the damage—including for emergency medical

care, food and shelter—is still not known. The Samoan government estimates damages to infrastructure alone could amount to \$US58 million. The total figure is likely to be much higher. The donations so far by the major regional powers are a pittance—\$NZ2 million by New Zealand, \$A3 million by Australia, and \$US1 million from the Asian Development Bank.

Moreover, the aid is not motivated by humanitarian concern, but is aimed at maintaining these island states within their respective spheres of influence and warding off rivals, particularly China. One should recall the fate of the Fijian people in January this year—11 died and thousands of homes were flooded in a devastating tropical storm. Damage was estimated at \$A17 million for infrastructure alone. New Zealand and Australia, determined to maintain the isolation of the Bainimarama regime, donated just \$A232,000 combined toward relief efforts.

As the former colonial power, New Zealand has a particular responsibility for Samoa’s continued economic backwardness. Ever since it first seized the territory from Germany at the start of World War I, New Zealand businesses extracted large profits from the islands—first, through the lucrative coconut oil trade, and, later after formal independence, as a source of cheap labour.

Washington is similarly unconcerned about the fate of ordinary American Samoans. For over a hundred years it used the territory, like its other colonial possessions, as a source of profit and cheap labour.

The resulting poverty and lack of services have only exacerbated the impact of the tsunami. Many Samoans and Tongans live in cheaply constructed houses, sometimes mere shacks, incapable of withstanding natural disasters. Practically none are insured. The victims face not only the destruction of their homes but also crops and livestock. Many villagers rely heavily on a combination of subsistence farming and remittances from relatives working abroad. The latter has already declined due to the global economic crisis.



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