

Earthquakes, tsunami destroy villages in Solomon Islands

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A series of earthquakes and a tsunami hit the Solomon Islands' Western Province last week, destroying entire villages and leaving at least 1,000 people homeless. Fortunately no one is reported to have died, although this is more because of luck than anything else. While news is still filtering out of the isolated and impoverished region, it is clear that there is no infrastructure in place to anticipate or respond to such disasters.

The first earthquake, measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale, struck on January 4 at 8:48 a.m., 36 kilometres south east of Western Province's Rendova Island. The island was later hit by a tsunami about three metres high. The Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre in Hawaii issued no warning due to the localised nature of the threat. A second earthquake measuring 7.2 in magnitude occurred at 10:37 a.m. south east of Gizo, the provincial capital. More than 100 further shocks have since been felt in the area, with the largest a magnitude 6.9 quake registered at 11:16 p.m. on January 5, about nine kilometres south east of Rendova.

The full extent of the damage is yet to be determined. The region has grossly inadequate transport and communication infrastructure; it took some time before even an initial assessment could be made by emergency rescue personnel and other experts.

Rendova and Tetepare islands were most seriously affected. About 500 homes are estimated to have been destroyed, with around 1,000 people, constituting one-third of the Rendova population, left homeless. Villages in the area are particularly vulnerable to tsunamis as they are usually located along the coast, with some homes built on stilts over the water.

A local police officer in Munda village told the *Solomon Star* about the impact of the subsequent tremors. "They [residents] have been living in fear because since the weekend they have been feeling slight tremors which some places in the province don't even feel. Even as we speak, we don't know, Rendova might be rocking now."

Photographs from a police helicopter that surveyed the area on January 5 showed debris lining the foreshore, and deep scars on nearby hills and cliffs caused by landslides.

The Red Cross has deployed information technology and telecommunication technicians from New Zealand in response to power outages and communication problems exacerbated by the earthquakes. A UNICEF spokesperson said the biggest issue confronting local people was access to clean water.

National Disaster Management Office spokesman Julian Maka'a reported that the village of Retavo, home to about 20 people, was completely inundated by the tsunami, while Baniata village lost 16 houses, with another 32 damaged. Maka'a admitted that no tsunami warning had been issued. "What we advise them is to just keep a look out on the waves. If they are abnormal then they should warn everybody to go," he told the *Solomon Star* on January 4.

People have effectively been left to their own devices. Residents knew from terrible experience to head for higher ground when the seismic activity occurred. In April 2007 a powerful quake measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale struck off Gizo, producing a 10-metre

high tsunami that killed 52 people and inflicted widespread damage. Gizo dive shop owner Danny Kennedy told Associated Press that the general rule is now that “if there’s anything more than 20 seconds of shaking or any sea water recedes, head for the hills”.

Home Affairs and Education Minister Mathew Wale said the government would closely monitor seismic activity in the Western Province, but admitted that villagers would be reliant on their own resources. “It’s important for village disaster committees, or even village committees or church committees to organise themselves to keep watch during the times of seismic activities,” he told the *Solomon Times*. “People [need] to keep watch and alert others either by ringing the church bell to inform people about what to do.”

Apparently such ad hoc measures were sufficient, on this occasion, to avert fatalities. Far worse disasters are inevitable, however. The Solomon Islands is part of the “Ring of Fire”—one of the most seismically active areas in the world. Western Province is home to several live volcanoes. The lack of any plan to develop an early warning earthquake and tsunami alert system reflects the contempt for ordinary people held by the Solomons’ government and the Australian-dominated intervention force, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

This is also evident in the emergency aid response. Prime Minister Derek Sikua toured the affected area on January 6 and declared that “the rehabilitation of victims of the earthquake is a top priority.” The visit, however, was little more than a photo opportunity. Sikua has announced no concrete proposals for relief.

Some limited aid, including fresh water, rice and tarpaulins, has been delivered. In addition, according to Solomon Islands Police Commissioner Peter Marshall, RAMSI has sent two helicopters and a sea vessel. This response again points to the bogus “humanitarian” pretext for the Australian-led intervention into the Solomons. Nearly six years after taking effective control over the country’s state apparatus, including the public finances, nothing has been done to assist those at risk of natural disaster.

The regional powers have offered a pittance in assistance. Acting Foreign Affairs Minister Simon Crean announced on January 6 that the Australian government would donate \$50,000. “Australia will consider further assistance once damage has been more fully assessed,” he claimed. New Zealand said it would donate \$A40,000, and the US pledged \$A80,000.

The latest earthquake and tsunami victims will likely be left homeless for years. Nearly three years after the devastating Gizo tsunami, many local residents are still living in makeshift tents. Repairs to the main road in Western Province’s capital were only completed last month. The scandalous situation underscores the cynicism of the pledges of support made by Canberra and other regional powers after the 2007 disaster.

The author recommends:

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