

Ten killed in Solomon Islands tsunami

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A tsunami hit remote areas of Solomon Islands on Wednesday, after an offshore earthquake measuring eight on the Richter scale. The tsunami, which was between 1 and 1.5 metres high, devastated villages and destroyed homes as far as 500 metres inland. According to initial reports, at least 10 people, including a child, have died on the Santa Cruz Islands, over 600 kilometres from Honiara, the capital of Solomon Islands.

Tsunami warnings were issued for a number of neighbouring countries in the South Pacific, and for Australia and New Zealand, but were later cancelled. Tsunami-type waves were reported in Vanuatu and New Caledonia.

The death toll in Solomon Islands is expected to rise, as authorities and aid workers reach remote areas, which have minimal transport and communications infrastructure. The full extent of the damage is not yet known, with some areas cut off. The closest airstrip was flooded and scattered with debris, hampering aid and rescue efforts. It was reported yesterday that only one government helicopter had been able to land in Lata, the capital of Temoto Province, one of the worst affected regions.

A number of people are still missing, amid fears that they may have been washed out to sea. At least five people have been injured, with most reportedly suffering broken limbs.

It appears that the communities hit by the tsunami received no warning of the impending catastrophe. The Solomons lies on the “Ring of Fire”, an area of intense tectonic activity around the Pacific that is prone to earthquakes and tsunamis. Many communities have historic experiences with tsunamis, and flee for higher ground as soon as they see or feel an earthquake or see the ocean water edge retreat toward the horizon. Those reported to have died were predominantly elderly people, apparently unable to scramble to higher areas

before the wave struck.

Though the wave was relatively low, the hut-like wooden homes in coastal regions stood little chance of resisting the deluge. As many as 3,000 people have been left homeless. In some cases, entire villages have been destroyed. In Nela, a village of 200 people, 95 percent of homes have reportedly been demolished. About 200 homes were washed away in Nea, another village. In other areas, houses were moved 10 metres by the floodwaters.

Local villages have also experienced strong aftershocks, prompting many to remain in makeshift shelters on higher ground. This morning, a 6.6-magnitude tremor struck, though there were no reports of further casualties or damage.

Aid organisations have warned that the disaster threatens to trigger an outbreak of disease, with dead livestock scattered around affected areas. Concerns have also been raised that villagers may lack access to clean water, with debris polluting wells.

The regional emergency coordinator of World Vision, Jeremiah Tabua, gave a sense of the tsunami’s aftermath. “I’m currently walking through one community and I’m knee-deep in water,” he told the Associated Press. “I can see a number of houses that have been swept away by the surge.”

Father Brown Beu, the premier of Temoto province, said many of the residents urgently needed clothing, cooking utensils and shelter. “Some families lost everything when the tsunami hit their villages,” Beu told the *Solomon Star*.

The rescue and relief effort is proceeding slowly. The most severely damaged areas are connected to the outside world only by rudimentary roads, and lack electricity supplies and any means of communication. Government boats containing aid supplies are expected to arrive in affected areas today.

Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Bob Carr, and his

New Zealand counterpart, Murray McCully, issued perfunctory statements expressing their concern for the plight of Solomon Islanders.

In reality, the tsunami's impact is an indictment of the callous indifference of the Australian and New Zealand governments to the plight of ordinary people in the South Pacific. The New Zealand government allocated just \$200,000 to emergency relief, while the Australian government sent an air force plane to survey the damage.

By contrast, the Australian government has spent more than a billion dollars on the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), its decade-old neo-colonial intervention force. Vast sums of so-called "aid" have been allocated to the police, prisons and other state institutions as part of Canberra's drive to bolster its strategic domination of the country and the Pacific region. Only a pittance has gone toward the basic health, education and infrastructure needs of the population.

When a powerful tsunami struck the Solomons in April 2007—resulting in 51 deaths and making thousands homeless—Canberra and Wellington showed no concern. Three years after that disaster, basic infrastructure repairs, including to local roads and jetties, had not been completed. Traumatized local residents spent years living in makeshift tents, with no foreign aid or government assistance forthcoming to reconstruct their villages.

There is no indication that the survivors of the latest tsunami will receive any better treatment, notwithstanding the hollow pledges of support made by the Australian and New Zealand governments.



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