

Samoan villagers demand compensation over sinking of New Zealand Navy ship

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Residents in several coastal villages in Samoa say their livelihoods have been destroyed and they deserve compensation after a New Zealand naval vessel sank on a nearby reef on October 5.

The dive and hydrographic vessel HMNZS Manawanui struck the reef while conducting a hydrographic survey about one nautical mile offshore. It is now lying on its side on the seafloor, 30 metres down in a marine reserve near the village of Tafitoala on the southern coast of Upolu, Samoa's most populous island.

The sinking has raised concerns about an impending ecological disaster. The area around the wreck has remained closed as authorities, including 60 NZ Defence Force staff, monitor for potential environmental hazards. Samoa's Marine Pollution Advisory Committee (MPAC) has confirmed that about 200,000 litres of fuel have so far escaped from the vessel, while 950 tonnes of marine oil remain in the ship's tanks.

New Zealand authorities claimed the leaking fuel would rapidly evaporate but there is growing evidence that marine life is being contaminated. According to the *Samoa Observer* on October 11, fishermen at Safata Bay were told to discard fish covered in oil from the "huge leak." MPAC said 5,000 square metres of the coral reef was already damaged.

A senior matai (chief), Tuia Paepae Letoa, said wind and current had carried oil towards the villages and seawater took it into the mangrove reserve. "It is a very serious problem for the district... not only is this hurting our livelihood, damaging the reef and coast, it is also spreading to our other reserves we depend on," he warned.

Fisherman Fatu Totua told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that he and his son would usually earn 200 Samoan talas (\$A108) per day by selling their catch. "Right now, we don't have means to earn a living for our family because we depend on the sea," he said.

According to villagers, the meeting to discuss the impact of the wreckage and push for compensation. They accused their own government of downplaying the damage. "This will continuously affect this generation and the future generation... we have to take action," Letoa said.

Others told the *Guardian* they were angry the shipwreck happened at all. "You can smell the diesel, they've destroyed our reef—I grew up on that reef all my life and they shouldn't have hit it there, no way," Manu Percival, a surf guide said. "Because we're a developing, poor country, they don't care. It's disgusting, especially as NZ has done so much historical damage to Samoa," he declared.

Work to prevent even more widespread pollution is being "scaled down" this week during the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) summit being hosted by Samoa and attended by the UK's King Charles III. Samoa's Prime Minister Fiam? Mata'afa said dive and coastal operations around the wreck would be "on hold" until next weekend.

New Zealand does not have a timeline for when the diesel will be removed from the vessel or any attempt at salvage. Experts say it is crucial to remove the fuel before cyclone season beginning in November, which could lead to the ship moving or breaking up. The *Guardian* cited Waikato University biodiversity and ecology professor Nick Ling, who said: "It [the diesel] can get on to the reef, it can coat seabirds and marine mammals, turtles and sea snakes."

Speaking on New Zealand television, Defence Minister Judith Collins downplayed concerns, saying there was "a little trickle" of oil coming from the wreck. She flatly declared: "Any oil coming out is obviously disturbing for people but we do know that it has not gone to the beaches. It is quite a small amount that we can see." Asked why Samoa's explanations were different to the New Zealand

authorities, Collins said: “I don’t know.”

The Manawanui ran aground at 6.46 p.m. in the evening in what were described as “choppy” seas and tried unsuccessfully to get off the reef. It quickly began to list and caught fire, likely from an oil leak in the engine room. At 7:52 p.m. Commander Yvonne Gray evacuated the ship as it began to sink. The 75 people on board abandoned ship in life-rafts and were rescued by Samoa’s Fire and Emergency Services Authority.

Neither the NZ Chief of Navy, Rear Admiral Garin Golding, nor Collins would comment on possible causes of the sinking—the first time the navy had lost a ship since World War II.

Collins initially rejected calls from Samoa for an apology, stating: “We’re obviously deeply traumatised. Frankly, our navy has gone through a very tough time.” Prime Minister Christopher Luxon later sent a formal apology to Apia.

The Defence Department will conduct an internal inquiry into the sinking. Victoria University of Wellington academic Iati Iati told the *Guardian*: “If New Zealand is to preserve any hope of being an honest broker in this region, it must avoid steps that will make this look like a cover-up. New Zealand has significantly compromised another country’s security.”

What is known is that the vessel was not fit for purpose. It was purchased second-hand by the 2017 Labour Party-led government on the advice of Defence Minister Ron Mark, an MP from the NZ First Party. With the navy facing financial blowouts, Mark cancelled the purchase of a military-specific ship in favour of a second-hand vessel. The MV Edda Fonn was a fifteen-year-old civilian workhorse used in the oil and gas industry in the North Sea. It did not meet basic naval specifications, including crucial manoeuvrability required for its new role.

The sinking will undoubtedly be used to boost demands for a major increase in military spending. US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell visiting Wellington in August, said the US and Australia had “encouraged” New Zealand to invest more in its armed forces, especially in patrolling and policing the Pacific. “We do think the maritime domain is important and we think that this is an arena where New Zealand’s contributions are natural,” Campbell said.

The ship’s loss has served to undermine boasts by Luxon that New Zealand is ready to play a key role as a “force multiplier” supporting the US and Australia in the drive to war against China. The navy has faced many difficulties, with ships being idle due to problems

recruiting and retaining personnel. Of the navy’s eight remaining ships, five are currently operational.

Australian defence academic Jennifer Parker, writing in the *Financial Review*, seized on the sinking to declare it “should be a wake-up call for Australia and New Zealand.” Parker opined: “Regional tensions are rising, and our naval forces are likely to be at the forefront of any confrontation. The ability to prevail in such a conflict depends not just on major warships and submarines but also on the enabling capabilities that underpin maritime operations...”

Whatever eventuates, the affair is shaping up as another incident in the litany of crimes and maltreatment inflicted on Samoa by New Zealand. The islands were a NZ colony from 1914 to 1962, a period which left a legacy of poverty and economic backwardness. NZ still maintains neo-colonial domination over Samoa, Tonga and other impoverished Pacific countries, which rely heavily on foreign aid to fund public services.

New Zealand has been directly responsible for major Samoan measles and flu outbreaks, including the 1918 influenza pandemic which killed 8,500 people, one-fifth of the population. In 2019 a measles outbreak spread to Samoa from Auckland, resulting in 5,700 cases and 83 deaths. Samoans bitterly reference the 1929 Black Saturday shooting when NZ police killed 11 Mau pro-independence protesters.

New Zealand’s principal concern in the Pacific is not the health and well-being of the local peoples, but to assert its place as a minor imperialist power and line-up the fragile Pacific states behind Washington’s aggressive confrontation with China. As the entire region is placed on a war footing, the concerns of the Pacific’s populations over their delicate and threatened environment are swept aside by the local powers.



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