

Tsunami after powerful quake hits off Samoa: scientists

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A powerful earthquake with a magnitude of up to 8.3 struck off the South Pacific island nation of Samoa on Tuesday, triggering a tsunami as coastal residents fled to higher ground.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre said waves 1.57 metres (five feet) tall hit American Samoa, while 0.7 metre waves were recorded in Samoa.

The centre had earlier issued a tsunami warning for a large swathe of the South Pacific including Fiji, New Zealand and Tonga after the US Geological Survey (USGS) reported a 7.9 magnitude quake.

The centre later said an 8.3 magnitude quake had been recorded at a depth of 33 kilometres (21 miles). It was not immediately clear if this was the same quake and the USGS's website did not provide exact details of its location.

"Sea level readings indicate a tsunami was generated," said a statement from the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre.

"It may have been destructive along coasts near the earthquake epicentre and could also be a threat to more distant coasts. Authorities should take appropriate action in response to this possibility."

Samoa resident Keni Lesa told AFP in the capital Apia that people were moving inland.

"I'm taking my family to a safe place. Everyone's getting out of coastal areas," he said.

But Lesa said there was no panic as "we have done a lot of training for this," living on a low lying island in an earthquake prone area.

There were no immediate reports of damage from the earthquake, apart from a few landslips.

In its preliminary earthquake report, the US Geological Survey put the epicentre 204 kilometres south-southwest of Samoa's capital Apia and at a depth of 85 kilometres.

The tsunami warning was also in effect for American Samoa, Samoa, Niue Island, the Wallis and Futuna Islands, the Tokelau atolls, the Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Kiribati, the Kermadec Islands, the Baker and Howland Islands, Jarvis Island, French Polynesia and the Palmyra Islands.

A tsunami watch was issued for Vanuatu, Nauru, the Marshall Islands, the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Kosrae Island, Papua New Guinea, Hawaii, Pohnpei in Micronesia, the Wake Islands, Pitcairn and the Midway Islands.

The USGS said the region was struck by a 5.6 magnitude quake around 20 minutes after the first.