

Tonga: Prime Minister reviews emergency relief work in Niuatoputapu

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From Prime Minister's Office, Nuku'alofa, Monday 2 November 2009; The Prime Minister, Dr. the Hon Feleti Vaka'uta Sevele, spent the weekend in Niuatoputapu, in order to review the status of the emergency relief work on the island since it was declared nationally as a disaster zone on 30 October. He was accompanied to the island last Saturday (31 Oct) morning by the Deputy Prime Minister, Dr. the Hon Viliami Ta'u Tangi, the Hon Minister for Lands, Lord Tuita, the Australian High Commissioner, H.E. Dr. Bruce Hunt and the NZ High Commissioner, H.E. Christine Bogle.

The Prime Minister was able to review the status of the island's makeshift medical centre and hospital, the Pasivulangi wharf at Falehau, the airport runway and terminal, and the main roads. He also visited all the island's three villages of Hihifo, Vaipoa and Falehau and some of the temporary camps that the villagers' had established in the hills.

The Prime Minister and the visiting team also held a major public meeting at 4.00pm on Sunday evening with the people of the island. It was attended by all the Church Leaders, District Officer, Town Officers, Government Representative and employees on the island as well as members of the emergency relief teams that were deployed immediately to the island under the leadership of Lord Ma'afu, the Hon Minister for Environment. Altogether there were 148 participants at this meeting.

The major item of discussion at the public meeting was the proposal for the relocation of homes in all three villages to higher ground. Government is already preparing to relocate to higher ground the government centre and residences, the hospital, the headquarters of Tonga Communications Corporation, and the Tonga Development Bank. The relocation of family homes is a more difficult call to make because, as it became evident in the meeting, people residing in the homes that were destroyed were not necessarily the legal owners of the homes or of the town allotments on which they were located, but were "housekeeping" for relatives who were either in Tongatapu or overseas. Not only that, people were generally reluctant to vacate their ancestral homes on which numerous generations have lived. The meeting agreed that public discussion on the proposal will continue.

The meeting also discussed the need for the restoration of the people's livelihoods including the immediate planting of emergency crops such sweet corn, kumala and potatoes, as well as the replanting of cash crops such as the pandanus trees on which the women depend for the unique handicrafts for which Niuatoputapu is renown. Also discussed were the necessary precautions to take as the annual tropical cyclone season

has just started, and the Fiji Meteorological Service has warned that we can expect 11 tropical cyclones this season with the first to hit before the end of 2009.

The Hon Prime Minister and his team will return to Nuku'alofa, via Vava'u this afternoon, Monday, 2 November. Meanwhile the Chief Secretary and Secretary to Cabinet, Busby Kautoke and the CEO for the Ministry of Transport, 'Eleni Siueli 'Aho will remain to finalise plans to install a tsunami warning system, by way of a system of sirens, on the island, but which can be activated from Tongatapu.

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