

Operation Niuatoputapu - day 2 Oct 1, 2009

Source: Government of Tonga

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From the Prime Minister's Office, Nuku'alofa, Tongatapu, October 1, 2009. At 6:50am, Wednesday 30th September 2009, the island of Niuatoputapu was struck by an 8.3 magnitude earthquake which lasted 20 minutes.

Five minutes after the earthquake the island of Niuatoputapu was hit by the first of 3 large tidal waves at 3 minute intervals measuring at about 6 meters.

The waves moved inland about 600 meters. The largest and the strongest was the last wave.

90% of the houses on the island have been destroyed with the villages of Hihifo and Falehau being the worst affected. The third village of Vaipoa was relatively unharmed.

There are 7 persons confirmed dead with 3 missing. The majority of the survivors have sustained minor injuries with 4 who are in a critical condition. The survivors have requested as a matter of urgency water, food, medical supplies, clothing, shelter and bedding.

They also requested government radio programmes of comfort and reassurance last night because many were afraid and in state of shock. They were still sheltering in the hills above the villages.

All of the island's water storage tanks have been either rendered unusable or destroyed completely.

All government schools were cancelled yesterday (30 Sept 09). A special Cabinet meeting was convened at 10:00am to work on the immediate government response to the natural disaster. Cabinet also met again this morning.

A plane was chartered to fly to Niutoputapu to carry out an aerial assessment at 3:30pm yesterday. They have reported considerable damage to the island particularly the administrative centre and most populated village of Hihifo.

The Hon. Acting Prime Minister, Lord Tuita made a public announcement last night on television and radio informing the nation of the natural disaster and the actions taken by government.

The patrol boat VOEA Neiafu departed last night at 7:00pm for Niuatoputapu with emergency supplies, equipment and personnel. This includes a team a medical team capable of carrying out emergency surgery and qualified trauma counselors. It is scheduled to arrive at Niuatoputapu at 6.00pm this evening.

Pending the condition of the runway at Niuatoputapu a special flight will depart Vava'u this morning at 9:00am to evacuate the 4 persons who are in a critical condition. (It has been reported that the aircraft landed safely on Niuatoputapu at around 12:00 noon today)

A French frigate is expected to arrive in Nuku'alofa on Friday (2 Oct 09) on a goodwill visit. A request has been made to the French authorities in New Caledonia to allow the ship to sail to Niuatoputapu with further emergency supplies. If that request is approved the French frigate will depart Nuku'alofa for Niuatoputapu on Saturday (3 Oct 09).

A radio fund-raising appeal is currently being carried out in Nuku'alofa today to raise funds and supplies for the people of Niuatoputapu. Vehicles have also been arranged to travel to all the villages of Tongatapu to collect food, clothing, bedding and other supplies that the public are willing to donate.

A daily media briefing will be held at 11:00am at the office of the National Disaster Management Office, from today onwards. Operation Niuatoputapu is being coordinated by Col. Siamelie Latu of the Tonga Defence Service.

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