

Tonga checks tsunami damage, several reported dead

Source: Agence France-Presse (AFP)

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NUKU'ALOFA, Sept 29, 2009 (AFP) - Tonga assessed damage in a northern island on Tuesday after reports of several deaths and widespread damage in the powerful earthquake and tsunami which battered nearby Samoa and American Samoa.

Government officials flew over the small island of Niuatoputapu close to Samoa looking for evidence of damage or casualties, as unconfirmed reports said five people were dead and six missing.

The deaths, if confirmed, would bring the total toll to nearly 60 after 53 were killed in Samoa and American Samoa, including foreign tourists.

Four-metre (yard) waves were reported to have hit northern Tonga after the 8.0 magnitude earthquake struck off the Samoan islands, triggering a tsunami which is said to have wiped out entire villages there.

The reports suggested some five percent of buildings on Niuatoputapu, whose communication lines had been cut, may have been destroyed.

"They said we're just going to have a look -- I think they fear there's some impact," said journalist Pisi Fonua, who joined the flight.

Nuku'alofa-based Fonua said he did not feel the earthquake or notice large waves in the capital, while sources in other countries also said the impact was minimal despite a brief, Pacific-wide tsunami alert.

New Zealand officials said "bigger than usual" waves were seen in the Cook Islands, where authorities closed schools and coastal government offices as a precaution.

Residents of Fiji's eastern islands moved inland as large waves hit, but there were no immediate reports of damage.

"There were precautions taken on the islands further east, they've gone further inland, but until now there's been no reports of damage," a Suva resident told AFP.

New Zealand officials also expressed concern for fishermen around Niue but Vanuatu, Kiribati, New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands were all spared large waves.

Samoa's Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi said he was "shocked beyond belief," while US President Barack Obama called the incident a "major disaster."

"So much has gone. So many people are gone," Malielegaoi said. "I'm so shocked, so saddened by all the loss."

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