

At least seven dead after quake, tsunami hit Samoa

10:37AM Wednesday Sep 30, 2009

Samoa residents have been evacuated from the coast to higher ground after a magnitude 8.3 quake struck this morning, followed by a tsunami.

The quake struck at 6.48am NZ time and was centred 200 kilometres from Samoa's capital Apia at a depth of 35 kilometres.

Witnesses reported that buildings and houses had been damaged and at least two people have died in American Samoa.

Russell Hunter, editor of *Samoa Observer*, has told *The Age* in Melbourne at least five people have died in a beach village "devastated" by large waves after the powerful quake.

He said a journalist had reported the fatalities in the village of Fautasi, west of the capital Apia, caused by massive waves rather than an earthquake.

Newstalk ZB reported that a three metre wave had hit Samoa's coast.

However the West Coast/Alaska Tsunami Warning Center reported waves of 1.57m had been recorded at Pago-Pago on American Samoa.

The waves that have caused destruction on Western Samoa's Upolu island were not as big, measuring about 0.7m above normal sea level.

A Radio Polynesia reporter told Radio New Zealand the south and south-east coasts of Upolu appeared to have been hardest hit.

"By the sound of some of the reports that have been coming in, it's not pretty at all," he said.

There were reports that low-lying parts of Monono Island, west of Upolu Island, had been underwater, he said.

Samoa journalist Cherelle Jackson said buildings and houses had been damaged by the wave and witnesses had told Radio Polynesia that three children had been injured in the quake.

There were also unconfirmed reports of deaths she said.

Ms Jackson said a full tsunami alert was activated about ten minutes after the quake.

All of the capital Apia has been evacuated to higher ground.

"All the schools, workplaces everyone has walked up - it's like a ghost town," she said.

There was a really good response from residents who had practised evacuation drills before she said "within minutes school children were walking up the hill".

Aftershocks are continuing to be felt.

The Samoa Alive news site is reporting products were thrown off shelves in supermarkets in Apia.

It also reports high seas hitting coastal areas around Fagaloa and Siumu on the eastern side of Upolu Island. School has been cancelled for the day for all school children.

"Long streams of cars are jamming the roads and it maybe a while for traffic officers to untangle the road jams," it said.

New Zealander Scott Mulholland, who works for a communications firm in Apia, also told Newstalk ZB everyone had fled.

He said the evacuation was speedy thanks to the fact that police are on duty at every major intersection at the moment because of the driving change-over from the right to the left hand side of the road.

New Zealand tourist, Graeme Ansell, told Radio New Zealand a village on the south-east coast of Upolu had been flattened.

He said he clambered up a nearby hill, and one of the people he is with has a broken leg.

On Twitter, George Daneillis who owns Samoa's Salani Surf resort tweets: "Our resort in Samoa has been totally destroyed, but the guests and staff were evacuated just in time".

A resident of a coastal village, Theresa Falele Dussey, told Radio New Zealand her house has been destroyed by the tsunami, as were houses and cars in a neighbouring village.

"We are still on Mt Vaea, we are still being told to stay put," she said.

"We lost a home already... our neighbouring villages, there are about three kids that have already been taken by the tsunami," Dussey said.

A four-year-old kid from Manono has been taken by the tsunami."

Mrs Dussey says she heard on the radio that a boat that was on the water at the time of the tsunami was "squashed" by the waves and that the four-year-old cannot be found.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center has issued a tsunami warning for American Samoa, Samoa, Niue, Wallis-Futuna, Tokelau, Cook Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Kermadec Islands, Fiji, Howland-Baker, Jarvis Island, French Polynesia, New Zealand, Palmyra Island, Vanuatu, Nauru, Marshall Islands and the Solomon Islands.

The centre has downgraded its warning to Hawaii from a warning to an advisory. There is no further information but it would suggest there is little danger for Hawaii.

- NZHERALD STAFF, NZPA, AP