

Disease outbreaks feared in tsunami-battered Samoa

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by Cherelle Jackson

APIA, Oct 3, 2009 (AFP) - Fears of deadly outbreaks of disease in tsunami-battered Samoa mounted Saturday, as frightened survivors sheltering on higher ground refused to return to their beachfront villages.

As roads and beaches were cleared of debris and rebuilding began, planeloads of medical supplies were rushed to the Pacific island nation which was pounded by massive waves following a 8.0-magnitude undersea quake Tuesday.

The number of people confirmed dead from the tragedy in Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga reached 176 Saturday with grave fears for 12 others still missing and officials warned the toll would rise.

Dr Limbo Fiu, a manager with the National Health Service in Samoa, said a second wave of deaths was looming as the injured continued to trickle into hospitals.

"In a few weeks, we will see many people sick with gastroenteritis and diarrhoea. That will affect the young and the elderly. Deaths are inevitable," he told reporters.

Tautala Mauala, secretary general of the Samoa Red Cross, said health officials had met in Apia Saturday to coordinate a health strategy, with epidemic disease becoming a growing concern.

"There are concerns with sanitation, and clean water is much needed," she told AFP. "We are already hearing some news of gastroenteritis and diarrhoea outbreaks, and there is a high potential likelihood of emerging diseases."

Mauala estimated up to 3,000 people lost their homes in the tsunami, with most now living with family and friends, many overcrowding existing houses.

Others are camping out in school buildings or living in crude homes under tarpaulins or tents in plantations and refusing to return to their traditional coastal settlements, Rosemarie North of the Samoa Red Cross said.

In the worst-hit areas along the southern coast of the main Samoan island of Upolu, families have abandoned their wiped-out villages and moved inland, posing problems for relief workers trying to bring them water and supplies.

North said that some villagers were too scared to return and in many cases the tsunami had changed the landscape and scoured away the land on which their homes and gardens once stood.

Paneta Sagale Lauiliu, who lost his mother in the tragedy, said his family would abandon its seaside home in favour of higher ground.

"We have no intention of moving back down," he told AFP from a camp an hour's walk from the coast. "There's no way we're going back to the beach and I don't think anyone else in our village will do that."

Lauiliu, whose four-year-old son Sepi was swept up by the tsunami and survived by clinging to a banana tree, said his family was considering abandoning its beach hut rental business.

There are hopes that Thursday's mass burial of the victims will help Samoans put the disaster behind them.

"Trauma has been seen as an issue, a lot of these people went very far inland because of fear and are afraid to return," the Samoa Red Cross's Mauala said.

"People are still in trauma and a lot of them don't want to answer questions or talk about what they've been through."

The earthquake and resulting tsunami, which left 135 dead and eight missing in Samoa, 32 dead in neighbouring American Samoa and nine dead in the Pacific island nation of Tonga, has prompted an international air effort.

Australia has sent 88 medical and search personnel to assist in recovery efforts while a New Zealand Air Force Boeing 757 landed in Samoa Saturday carrying police dog search teams and medical experts.

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