

## **American Samoa's tsunami 'like Hurricane Katrina': rescuer**

**Source:** Agence France-Presse (AFP)

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**PAGO PAGO, American Samoa, Oct 3, 2009** (AFP) - The deadly tsunami that crashed into American Samoa last week produced scenes as calamitous as those of Hurricane Katrina, a US rescuer who has witnessed both disasters said Saturday.

Ferocious waves were unleashed by a 8.0 magnitude undersea quake which rattled the region early Tuesday, leaving as many as 180 people dead in American Samoa, neighbouring Samoa and the Pacific island nation Tonga.

"We were deployed to (Hurricane) Katrina, and in terms of destruction it's very similar, I don't think you can prepare for it," United States rescue worker Judy Bartzatt told AFP, referring to the storm that smashed into the southern US coast in 2005.

"The water must have come with unimaginable force. The power and the suddenness of it, some people had just moments to run."

In the capital Pago Pago, residents saw the deep harbour, long assumed to be one of the safest in the Pacific, all but empty after the quake hit.

Lewis Malala scrambled to the roof of the two-storey Pago Plaza as five waves smashed into the city, throwing shipping containers, cars and boats through churches and homes.

Malala said he saw people swept from the restaurant below to their deaths.

"Lucky it was early, there were little (few) people, many still at home," he said. "Half an hour later, people waiting for the bus to school, driving to work, there would have been many more bodies."

Schoolchildren account for many of the dead from a handful of devastated villages on American Samoa's west coast, where the tsunami hit as they walked home from school after the earthquake, said Alega village resident Candy Mann.

"My wife's cousin was walking to meet the kids and she was walking across the bridge and had just got hold of her daughter and that's when the tsunami hit and snapped that bridge off," Mann said.

"She was seven years old. Found the following day still with her backpack on and still with her school uniform on, buried under the bridge in the mangroves."

Ironically, the disaster, which killed 32 people in American Samoa, hit just two hours before an official tsunami drill was set to take place, testing the disaster readiness of, in particular, schools and emergency services.

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