

Remoteness hampers aid flow to tsunami-hit Pacific islands

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LONDON (AlertNet) - Their remoteness had made a cluster of islands in the South Pacific the perfect spot to escape to on holiday but when a disaster struck, it became a major problem for aid agencies trying to reach the survivors.

Three days after four tsunamis hit Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga, many aid agencies still struggled to deliver emergency aid to the islands, the biggest of which - Samoa - is located over 4,000 km (2,500 miles) from the nearest continent of Australia.

"It is certainly very difficult because there is little in the way of scheduled aircraft going in," said Lasse Petersen, general manager of British-based charity Shelter Box.

"We've got resources in Melbourne and in Auckland and we are trying to find ways to get that moved up to Samoa," he said, adding that the options ShelterBox was looking at ranged from chartered planes to using space on New Zealand's government aid flights.

ShelterBox provides boxes that contain equipment vital for survival after a disaster and weigh 55 kg each.

"We had a freight price quoted yesterday from Melbourne to Samoa for 100,000 pounds (\$159,000) to send 100 or 200 boxes, so the freight component would be more than the cost of the box. Sadly, what happens sometimes in a disaster freight prices increase," Petersen said.

By Friday, the death toll from the tsunamis, caused by an 8 magnitude undersea quake, was near 150 in Samoa, 31 in American Samoa and nine in Tonga, and hundreds of people remained missing.

In American Samoa - home to around 65,500 people - 2,700 were displaced, said John Torres, a spokesman at aid agency ADRA International.

UNICEF, the United Nations children's fund, also said the remoteness of the volcanic islands made delivering aid there difficult.

The fund had stockpiled medical supplies and water purification kits in relatively nearby Fiji. Shipping the aid to Samoa and Tonga by boat would take too long while sending it by air is expensive, said Fiona Hesselden, a deputy director at UNICEF UK.

Aid workers are also having to contend with destroyed roads and jammed telephone lines.

"Getting information around the island (Samoa) is very difficult," said Michael Delaney, a humanitarian response coordinator at Oxfam, adding that the agency was focusing on providing clean water and sanitation to prevent the spread of diseases.

(Additional reporting by James Kilner)

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