

Samoa: Hands and feet of tsunami response

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Nearly a week after an earthquake and tsunami that caused the worst disaster in living memory, tools and water are top priorities for the Samoa Red Cross Society response.

Bush knives, shovels, hammers and nails are being procured by the Samoa Red Cross Society, which is supported by 11 members of a Field Assessment and Coordination Team (FACT) sent by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

With these tools, an estimated 3,500 people who left their coastal homes will now be able to establish latrines, build more secure shelters and tend agricultural plots.

Clean drinking water

At the same time, the Red Cross is continuing to truck water and water containers to affected areas. A FACT member specialising in water and sanitation is investigating longer-term options for re-establishing clean drinking water and safe toilets.

The disaster took 142 lives and left seven missing from two villages. More than 335 people received medical treatment for injuries. Thirty-two people remain in hospital.

A series of three tsunamis, whose highest swell was 11 metres, destroyed many houses along the low-lying southern coast of Upolu, where tourism and relaxed beach fale (houses) were a way of life.

Higher ground

Some people whose houses remain intact feel insecure on the coast and are camping on higher ground, often on other plots of land they own.

The Samoa Red Cross is working with other agencies to make sure each settlement is being reached, and people housed with friends and family are also receiving distributions of aid. Red Cross teams continue to check that people's most urgent needs are being met.

Early on Monday, a Samoa Red Cross assessment team went to Manono Island between Upolu and Savai'i in response to reports of hardship there. Other priorities are providing soap and sanitary towels for women, promoting hygienic practices and monitoring disease.

Volunteers are key

In all this work, Red Cross volunteers are key, says Tautala Mauala, Secretary General of the Samoa Red Cross.

"They're so great. They are the hands and feet of all this," she says.

When church bells rang out in a tsunami warning after the 06.50 earthquake on 29 September, the Secretary General jumped into her car. "I was thinking immediately of our response and I was mobilizing our volunteers," she said.

"We've had lots of drills in tsunami preparedness since the Indian Ocean tsunami. Now the volunteers know where to go. They have identified places to go on higher ground for all the villages."

Terrible destruction

But after the all-clear was sounded, news started to arrive of terrible destruction on the southern coast of Upolu, Samoa's main island.

The Samoa Red Cross's 130 volunteers immediately undertook assessments and began distributing food, water, tarpaulins and blankets.

Within the first three days, volunteers and staff delivered more than tarpaulins, blankets, hygiene kits, boxes or sacks of clothing, and countless other items including toys, surgical masks, body bags, medical equipment, food, cooking and eating utensils and cooking pots.

Aid workers

In addition, Red Cross volunteers have cooked and served food to dozens of nurses, doctors, police and aid workers active in the affected area.

In Samoa, as the Samoa Red Cross continues to provide humanitarian assistance, the IFRC is appealing for 2.9 million Swiss francs to provide emergency relief, health, water and sanitation, shelter, psychosocial support, restoring family links, livelihoods, disaster risk reduction and capacity building. The relief and recovery operation in Samoa will support 15,000 of the most vulnerable people and will be carried out over an 18-month timeframe.