

Samoa: Tsunami relief update, 2 Nov 2009

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The tsunami that hit the islands of Samoa and American Samoa claimed the lives of many Samoans. Two of those victims were citizens of Samoa staying in American Samoa. Samoa and American Samoa are independent nations, which requires special procedures for the transport of deceased persons across borders. The Samoa Red Cross Society worked with the Samoa Government and the American Samoa Government in the repatriation of these tsunami victims, to return them to Samoa and their families.

The lives of Mr. Kapisi Sima of Fogatuli, Savaii and Mr. Pita Tanielu of Tuanai, Upolu were claimed by the tsunami that hit the island of American Samoa on the 29th of September 2009. A Samoa Red Cross volunteer, Tofa Apulu Veronika Matautia, in American Samoa was contacted by the victim's families and played a key role in organizing their return to Samoa.

The situation of the body of Mr. Kapisi Sima in American Samoa was presented to the National Disaster Council meeting on the 13th of October. The proposed logistics for the return of these victims to Samoa was unanimously agreed upon at the meeting. Word of the second victim, Mr. Pita Tanielu, reached the Samoa Red Cross on the evening of the 13th. After seeking the advice of Afioga Aiono Mose Sua, CEO of MFAT and Tofa Taulealeausumai Laavasa, Chairman of DAC, Mr. Pita Tanielu was added to the repatriation plans the following day.

The task of bringing these victims home involved a coordinated effort from a number of people and organizations. The Samoa government provided the funding needed for the transportation of the bodies. The American Red Cross met morgue fees in American Samoa and Congressman Faleomavaega Eni Hunkin provided the caskets for both victims. The Samoa Red Cross Society accepted the responsibilities of organizing all transport related matters to get the victims from their location in American Samoa to their home villages in Samoa.

After obtaining health clearance from the Samoa Ministry of Health, arrangements were made with Polynesian Airlines to fly the bodies to Samoa's Faleolo airport. The bodies left American Samoa on Monday, the 19th of October arriving in Samoa on the same day. The Samoa Red Cross Society arranged for transport of the victims from Faleolo airport to their home villages. Funeral services were held the same day for both victims in their home villages.