

Tsunami deaths likely to rise in Pacific islands

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- * Relief effort begins after Tsunami hits islands
- * Villages and holiday resorts destroyed
- * U.S. President Obama declares major disaster
- * Tsunami watch for Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, India

By Michael Perry

SYDNEY, Oct 1 (Reuters) - Relief workers in American Samoa and Samoa on Thursday searched for survivors after a series of tsunamis smashed into the tiny Pacific islands, killing possibly more than 100 people and flattening villages.

Television images showed homes ripped apart, cars submerged in the sea or lodged in trees and large fishing boats hurled ashore by the waves generated by an 8.0 magnitude quake southwest of American Samoa, a U.S. territory.

Some victims were washed out to sea by waves that reached at least 6 metres (20 feet) high.

A second 7.9 magnitude earthquake hit the Indonesian island of Sumatra late Wednesday, prompting the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center to issue a tsunami watch for Indonesia, India, Thailand and Malaysia.

U.S. President Barack Obama declared a major disaster in American Samoa and ordered federal aid to help recovery efforts. Two U.S. C-130 transport planes were due to arrive there on Thursday, the beginning of an air bridge that will bring in relief workers and supplies.

"This will not be a short-term response," said Craig Fugate, the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which coordinates the federal government's response to disasters.

"We know we're going to have to work to get resources in there, both in the immediate, which is the airlift, but also looking at shipping to bring in resources that are going to be needed in the next couple of weeks," he told reporters.

Fugate said the airport in American Samoa had been reopened but he stopped short of estimating casualties, saying the agency would wait for reports from Togiola Tulafono, the governor of the U.S. territory.

Speaking from Hawaii, Tulafono said at least 24 people were killed and 50 injured in American Samoa, with the southern portion of the main Tutuila Island "devastated."

Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said at least 60 people had been killed in Samoa.

The Australian government said two Australians, a 6-year-old girl and a woman aged 50, were killed and six others were missing. "It does look like there will be substantial loss of life in Samoa," said Australian Aid Minister Bob McMullan.

In Washington, Obama offered his condolences and said the United States was sending help to American Samoa.

"We also stand ready to help our friends in neighboring Samoa and throughout the region and we will continue to monitor this situation closely as we keep the many people who have been touched by this tragedy in our thoughts and our prayers.

HUGE WAVES, BUILDINGS DEMOLISHED

Shortly after local radio tsunami warnings were issued in the islands, waves started crashing into the capital of American Samoa, Pago Pago, and villages and resorts on the southern coasts, witnesses said.

Joey Cummings, a radio broadcaster in American Samoa, interviewed by ABC's "Good Morning America" program, said the tsunami produced a destructive, muddy river that swept away trees, boulders, cars and boats.

"If you have a building and it wasn't made out of concrete, bricks, it doesn't exist any more," he said. "You just have a series of concrete slabs with debris strewn all over the place. It looks like a bomb went off."

Ausegalia Mulipola, assistant chief executive of Samoa's disaster management office, told Reuters that there were reports of bodies covered in the large amounts of sand brought onshore by the waves.

Disaster officials said the death toll in Samoa may reach 100 as rescuers search for bodies on the southern shore of Upolu island. Twenty villages on the island, including Lepa, the home of Samoa's prime minister, were reportedly destroyed.

"Thankfully the alarm sounded on the radio and gave people time to climb to higher ground. But not everyone escaped," said Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, adding that two children en route to hospital were swept away.

"Their car was just taken away. I'm so shocked, so saddened by all the loss," he told reporters on a flight from Auckland, New Zealand to Apia, the capital of Samoa.

The waves also destroyed tourist resorts in the area.

Wendy Booth, owner of the Samoan resort Sea Breeze on Upolu, said she and her husband were almost washed away when the waves destroyed their resort and carried its restaurant out to sea.

"The second wave hit and came up through the floor, pushed out the back door and threw us outside," she told Fairfax Radio Network in Australia, adding that the couples hanged onto each other and a handrail as parts of their resort disintegrated.

New Zealand said there were also serious concerns about the neighboring island nation of Tonga after a 4-metre (13-foot) wave hit its northern coast. Tongan officials confirmed seven people were killed, while three were missing late Wednesday.

The two Samoas and Tonga have a combined population of about 400,000 people and rely on a combination of subsistence agriculture, fishing and tourism.

Small tsunamis also reached New Zealand, Hawaii and Japan.

An Indian Ocean tsunami on Dec. 26, 2004, which killed about 230,000 people in 11 countries, is the worst on record.

Red Cross teams had mobilized more than 100 emergency workers who were collecting coconuts to help meet early food and water needs in the affected Pacific islands, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said.

(Additional reporting by Adrian Bathgate and Mantik Kusjanto in Wellington, Rob Taylor and James Grubel in Canberra, Stacey Joyce, David Alexander and Debbie Charles in Washington, Bud Seba in Houston, Jim Christie in San Francisco, Peter Henderson in Los Angeles; Editing by Paul Simao)

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