

## **We Say: Lack of Preparedness in Dealing with Disasters**

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Last month's tsunami in the Solomon Islands exposed the nation and the entire region's lack of preparedness in dealing with the disaster—both before and after the devastating event. Caused by an undersea quake off Gizo that registered 8.0 on the Richter scale, the tsunami left 52 dead at last count and almost an identical number missing.

An estimated 7000 homes have been swept away leaving thousands with neither shelters nor livelihoods. A vast number of people who took shelter on higher ground after the devastation continue to live in makeshift dwellings on hillsides, too frightened to come back to live on the ravaged coastline.

While the human toll of the disaster is nowhere near that of the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004 that left nearly 200,000 people in several countries dead, the number is still significant for a small, sparsely populated Pacific islands country. Had the same tsunami hit more populous coastlines like those of South Asia or South East Asia, it would have claimed lives by the thousands.

The scattered sites of the disaster, their remoteness and an almost complete lack of infrastructure to accommodate large air and sea transport vehicles, getting aid across to the victims in time became a logistics nightmare. It took several days for basic aid like drinking water, food and makeshift shelter units to reach some of the more remote islands.

Following the disaster, the director of the International Tsunami Information Centre based in Hawaii told the media that millions of dollars in funding since the December 2004 tsunami had flowed mostly to Indian Ocean nations and that Pacific islands countries continued to be under resourced in upgrading their early warning systems.

Obviously it is the gargantuan proportions of the 2004 tsunami tragedy that may have diverted a major chunk of the funding to islands in the Indian Ocean, but that in no way justifies treating the islands of the Pacific below par. In fact the Pacific is a far more seismically active zone and merits a state of the art warning system especially because of the remoteness and isolation of its populations.

It is therefore the individual and collective leadership of the islands as well as apex organisations charged with development and disaster forecast and management affairs

who must share the blame for their failure in following up adequately with international donors and funding agencies to put in place a sophisticated system following the Asian tsunami.

While the region as a whole must collectively work to put in place such a system expeditiously, each individual country must evaluate its own peculiar topography, accessibility, logistics, disaster management infrastructure and population distribution to create a quick response system.

It is not hard to come up with practical yet cost-effective solutions. Much can be learnt simply from the survival instincts of the affected population soon after the tsunami: As they saw it coming and heard warnings over the radio, people headed for higher ground—a simple act of self-preservation.

**Shelters on high ground:** Islands governments need to take immediate steps to garner enough aid to build tsunami and cyclone shelters like the ones built in typhoon prone areas of the United States—on higher ground and train inhabitants to service and maintain these. For instance, rainwater can be harvested and stored in tanks.

The shelters must also be equipped with first aid and emergency medical and equipment. Such shelters would be self-sufficient for several days until aid arrives.

**Communications:** Solar energy powered radio units can be used to communicate with the coordination centres to requisition the right kind of aid and file reports when disaster strikes. The Solomon Islands already has a successful experiment in PfNet, the email and Internet service that is accessible in areas that do not even have power supplies. There is no reason why that can not be integrated into the country's disaster management system and replicated by other islands nations.

Islands nations' mobile phone networks also need to be urgently linked to disaster management and communication centres for simultaneous broadcast of text messages to people living in potentially dangerous locations.

**Education and training:** Information campaigns as well as training exercises need to be carried out from time to time to familiarise people with disaster prevention and management routines.

**Relocation:** Although it would be difficult to convince inhabitants of small, low-rise islands to relocate to other more accessible and safer islands with higher ground within their countries' own political boundaries, the idea of relocation must be seriously considered and adopted into disaster prevention plans. Some political leaders in the Solomons have actually proposed this after the tsunami.

Populations on such small and remote islands as Simbo which lost 39 lives and left nearly 6000 homeless, Rannoga (which incidentally rose three metres following the Gizo earthquake exposing nearly 100 metres of its shoreline out to sea), and Vella La Vella

need to be looked at seriously for possible relocation—for these are the islands that took aid agencies longest to reach. It remains to be seen if the government will muster the political will to implement such relocations.

Typically tsunamis travel at around the speed of jet planes in the open seas, leaving very little time for putting out alerts and actually moving people to higher ground—the first physical defence against a tsunami. It is therefore important to ensure that relocation sites should be able to handle the increased influx of population without causing social or physical tensions nor exerting too much pressure on the dry land area on higher ground.

However, these measures are still no solution for atoll nations like Kiribati and Tuvalu whose highest points are just a few metres above sea level and whose coastlines are in any case being encroached by sea level rise.

The only answer to their problem is mass migration to larger countries—a huge political hot potato no one wants to deal with— even as islanders from these atolls watch bits of their land being gulped down by the ocean from right under their feet.