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Hawaii spared effects of deadly tsunami



Vasily Titov, Director of NOAA Tsunami Research Center and Director Chip McCreery, discuss wave activity computer grafts at Honolulu Harbor at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center, Tuesday Sept. 29, 2009 in Ewa Beach, Hawaii on Oahu.

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By GREG SMALL, HERBERT A. SAMPLE, Associated Press Writers

HONOLULU (AP) — The earthquake and tsunami that ravaged Samoa and American Samoa prompted officials in Hawaii to take precautions against possible devastating flooding as some residents prayed that loved ones in their homeland survived.

At the American Samoa government office in Honolulu, the telephones were ringing constantly as worried Samoans in Hawaii, Las Vegas, California, Utah and elsewhere on the mainland inquired about the tsunami's aftereffects. Some in Hawaii frantically texted and e-mailed family members back home.

Hawaii and much of the rest of the Pacific were placed under tsunami advisories for a few hours Tuesday following the earthquake. The warnings and watches were canceled by the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Honolulu after the threat of a tsunami subsided.

Still, the center said sea level changes and strong currents could occur along Hawaii's coasts, posing a hazard to swimmers and boaters. As a precaution, a couple of schools closed because of their proximity to the shoreline.

"We are asking for the (assistance) of all of our residents and visitors to keep out of the water and away from the beaches and river mouths," Honolulu Mayor Mufi Hannemann said.

"These precautionary measures are being implemented to keep everyone safe."

The mayor added a personal note.

"My thoughts are with friends and family in Samoa," Hannemann said. "I know many of us have relatives and good friends in the affected areas, and we pray that they are safe and secure despite what must have been a very frightening time. We hope no one was injured and expect a quick recovery."

The American Samoa government office's handful of staff members were having the same trouble as everyone else trying to get through to their homeland. Telephone service to the island was spotty.

The governor of American Samoa, Togiola T.A. Tulafono, who was in Honolulu to discuss economic development and ocean policy, said at a press conference that there appeared to be "fairly major damage" to the western and southern sides of the island, but little if any on the northern side. He said several landslides had been reported, including one near the governor's mansion.

Many major roads have been heavily damaged and some were impassable, making it difficult for emergency workers to access small villages that were

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inundated, he said.

He recounted the experience of the wife of his chief of security, Capt. Alapati Fano. Tuesday morning in American Samoa, Fano's wife felt the earthquake while driving on a coastal road to pick up her children at school when the first tsunami hit, Tulafono said.

The couple's car was heavily damaged but she was unharmed, the governor said. The story helped officials estimate that fewer than 10 minutes passed between the earthquake and the first of four waves that hit the island, he said.

Tulafono said his immediate family was safe but feared that his extended family had suffered one or more fatalities.

"I don't think anybody is going to be spared in this disaster," he said.

Tulafono said his government has asked private businesses in American Samoa for heavy equipment.

The governor is to board one of two Coast Guard planes Tuesday night that will ferry emergency supplies to American Samoa.

A half-dozen Honolulu pastors who have Samoan congregants were communicating with each other through e-mail and texting, said Taacoo Alualu, pastor of the Solid Rock Fellowship Assembly of God.

"The main focus of Christians right now is prayer to the Lord," said Alualu. "That's the main hope, that everything will be OK."

Hawaiian Airlines announced it intended to operate its next flight from Honolulu to American Samoa on Thursday evening as scheduled, pending confirmation of conditions at Pago Pago International Airport. The airport was closed to commercial flights after the disaster.

Federal Aviation Administration spokesman Ian Gregor in Los Angeles said the airport's runways were closed because of widespread debris, but one was to be cleared Tuesday afternoon for emergency use.

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