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United States Sending Assessment Teams to Tsunami-Stricken Areas

Washington - The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is sending two disaster assessment teams to American Samoa, along with a team from the U.S. Coast Guard, to assess the impact of an earthquake, the ensuing tsunami and extensive flooding, the White House says.

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(Media-NewsWire.com) - Washington — The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is sending two disaster assessment teams to American Samoa, along with a team from the U.S. Coast Guard, to assess the impact of an earthquake, the ensuing tsunami and extensive flooding, the White House says.

"We also stand ready to help our friends in neighboring Samoa and throughout the region, and we'll continue to monitor the situation closely as we keep the many people who've been touched by this tragedy in our thoughts and in our prayers," President Obama said September 30.

Early on September 29, a magnitude 8.0 to 8.3 earthquake struck deep in the Pacific Ocean floor midway between the Samoa and American Samoa island groups in the South Pacific, about 6:48 a.m. local time (1:48 p.m. EDT; 17:48 GMT), according to the U.S. Geological Survey. The quake struck an estimated 18 kilometers below the ocean floor along a well-known Pacific fault line, 190 kilometers from American Samoa and 200 kilometers from Samoa.

Immediately following the earthquake, a tsunami struck Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga, causing widespread destruction, some deaths and injuries, and extensive flooding, according to the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC) at Ewa Beach, Hawaii. The center is part of the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Reports from authorities in the islands indicate that the number known to be killed and injured continues to rise as areas devastated by the tsunami are reached by rescue and assistance teams.

PTWC geophysicists issued a series of tsunami warnings and watch messages for the immediate areas around the Samoa island groups and outward across the Pacific September 29. The messages indicated that destructive tsunamis could strike coastlines near the epicenter within minutes and more distant coastlines within hours. The center monitored sea levels and tsunami arrival times continuously in the aftermath of the earthquake.

Obama declared the Territory of American Samoa a major disaster area late September 29 and ordered federal aid to supplement territory and local recovery efforts, the White House said. The aid will support "urgent life-sustaining and public health and safety measures," the White House statement added.

FEMA has sent an incident management assistance team and a planning and response team to American Samoa on a U.S. Coast Guard C-130 aircraft to provide support and assessment, the agency said in a prepared statement. A second aircraft was sent with emergency supplies.

"FEMA, who has provisions prepositioned in a distribution center in Hawaii, is also preparing to send supplies as requested to help meet the immediate needs of the survivors," the agency statement said.

FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate said the president's actions make federal funding immediately available to affected individuals in American Samoa.

New Zealand officials reported that they are sending emergency supplies, food, water and essential equipment to Samoa at the request of the islands' government.

The U.S. Geological Survey reported September 30 that a magnitude 7.6 undersea earthquake struck off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, about 5:15 p.m. local time (10:16 GMT) from 80 kilometers beneath the ocean floor. The agency said this earthquake, although also along a well-known Pacific fault line, was not related to the quake that struck the Samoa island groups.

EARLY TSUNAMI WARNING

The December 2004 tsunami across the Indian Ocean ultimately led to the deaths of approximately 227,898 people across 11 countries, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. An early warning tsunami system with adequate equipment was not available to most of the areas struck by that tsunami.

But geophysicists at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Hawaii told the Honolulu Advertiser newspaper that two technological innovations have helped to sharpen forecasting and warnings that help save lives when minutes matter.

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In the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, there has been an expanded use of Deep-ocean Assessment and Reporting of Tsunami (DART) buoys in the world's oceans. The buoys report wave movements following earthquakes to alert warning centers, which determine the scope of the threat and then warn communities in broad coverage areas, usually within minutes of the initial earthquake report.

The DART buoys were designed by NOAA's Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory in Seattle, Washington, to detect tsunamis as they move across the ocean.

Another factor has been the development of a tsunami modeling system that effectively predicts the speed, size and strength of tsunamis following earthquakes, say geophysicists at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center.

For more on tsunami warning, see Disaster Early Warning Systems on America.gov.

Read more: <http://www.america.gov/st/energy-english/2009/September/20090930153740dmslahrellek0.8893701.html?CP.rss=true#ixzz0SgJPIhWM>



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