

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Dozens killed in South Pacific tsunami

Triggered by an 8.3 magnitude quake in the ocean, tsunami reportedly kills at least 34 in Samoa and American Samoa
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Pago Pago, American Samoa — The Associated Press Last updated on Wednesday, Sep. 30, 2009 06:45AM EDT

A powerful Pacific Ocean earthquake spawned towering tsunami waves that swept ashore on Samoa and American Samoa early Tuesday, flattening villages, killing dozens of people and leaving several workers missing at devastated National Park Service facilities.

Cars and people were swept out to sea by the fast-churning waters as survivors fled to high ground, where they remained huddled hours later. Signs of devastation were everywhere, with a giant boat getting washed ashore and coming to rest on the edge of a highway and floodwaters swallowing up cars and homes.

The quake, with a magnitude between 8.0 and 8.3, struck around dawn about 33 kilometres below the ocean floor, 190 kilometres from American Samoa – a U.S. territory that is home to 65,000 people – and 200 kilometres from Samoa.

In North America, a tsunami advisory for the West Coast from the California-Mexico border to the Oregon-Washington border has been issued.

According to the West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Centre the danger is for the moment limited to California and Oregon – and does not include Washington, British Columbia or Alaska.

Hampered by power and communications outages, South Pacific officials hours later struggled to assess the damage and casualties.

Mase Akapo, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service in American Samoa, reported at least 19 people were killed in four different villages on the main island of Tutuila. He had no additional details.

In neighbouring Samoa, an Associated Press reporter saw the bodies of about 20 victims in a hospital at Lalomanu town on the south coast of the main island of Upolu, and said the surrounding tourist coast had been devastated. At least three villages were flattened.

An unspecified number of fatalities and injuries were reported in the Samoan village of Talamoia.

American Samoa Governor Togiola Tulafono said at least 50 were injured, in addition to the deaths.

American Samoa is home to a U.S. national park that appeared to be especially hard hit. Holly Bundock, spokeswoman for the National Park Service's Pacific West Region in Oakland, Calif., said the superintendent of the park and another staffers had been able to locate only 20 per cent of the park's 13 to 15 employees and 30 to 50 volunteers.

Mike Reynolds, superintendent of the National Park of American Samoa, was quoted as saying four tsunami waves 4.5 to 6 metres high roared ashore soon after the quake, reaching up to 1.5 kilometres inland. Ms. Bundock spoke with him from his vantage point under a coconut tree uphill from Pago Pago Harbour; he reported that the park's visitor centre and offices appeared to have been destroyed.

The National Park of American Samoa is the only national park south of the equator, a scenic expanse of reefs, picturesque beaches, tropical forests and wildlife that include flying foxes and sea turtles.

Residents in both Samoa and American Samoa reported being shaken awake by the quake, which lasted two to three minutes. The initial quake was followed by at least three aftershocks of at least 5.6 magnitude.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a general alert from American Samoa to New Zealand; Tonga suffered some coastal damage from 13-foot waves.

New Zealander Graeme Ansell said the beach village of Sau Sau Beach Fale was leveled.

"It was very quick. The whole village has been wiped out," Mr. Ansell told New Zealand's National Radio from a hill near Samoa's capital, Apia. "There's not a building standing. We've all clambered up hills, and one of our party has a broken leg. There will be people in a great lot of need 'round here."

Schools and businesses were closed, with the Samoan capital virtually deserted.

"Our house has been taken by the tsunami and we have lost everything," Teresa Sulili Dusi told National Radio, adding that "everything dropped on the floor and we thought the house was going to go down as well. Thank God, it didn't."

Local media said they had reports of some landslides in the Solosolo region of the main Samoan island of Upolu and damage to plantations in the countryside outside Apia.

American Samoa Governor Togiola Tulafono was at his Honolulu office assessing the situation but was having difficulty getting information, said Filipp Ilaoa, deputy director of the office.

"There is some water damage to residences," Ilaoa said. "To what extent and how much, and how many villages are effected, that is a mystery at this time."

Rescue workers found a scene of destruction and debris with cars overturned or stuck in mud. The staff of the port ran to higher ground, and police soon came by, telling residents to get inland. Several students were seen ransacking a gas station/convenience store.

In Fagatogo, water reached the waterfront town's meeting field and covered portions of the main highway, which was plagued by rock slides.

Rear Adm. Manson Brown, Coast Guard commander for the Pacific region, said the Coast Guard is in the early stages of assessing what resources to send to American Samoa.

"We're going to assume, because a tsunami of this sort is probably going to wreak havoc in the port, we're going to have to get additional personnel and supplies down through the airport," Rear Adm. Brown told reporters in Honolulu.

The earthquake and tsunami were big, but not on the same large scale of the 2004 Indonesian tsunami that killed more than 150,000 across Asia the day after Christmas in 2004, said tsunami expert Brian

Atwater of the U.S. Geological Survey in Seattle.

The 2004 earthquake was at least 10 times stronger than the 8.0 to 8.3 measurements being reported for Tuesday's quake, Mr. Atwater said. It's also a different style of earthquake than the one that hit in 2004.

The tsunami hit American Samoa about 25 minutes after the quake, which is similar to the travel time in 2004, Atwater said. The big difference is there were more people in Indonesia at risk than in Samoa.

With a report from Mark Hume, The Globe and Mail

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