

Small tsunami hits Solomons, other warnings ended

February 6 2013, by Kristen Gelineau

A powerful earthquake off the Solomon Islands on Wednesday generated a tsunami of up to 1.5 meters (about 5 feet) that damaged dozens of homes and left at least four people missing and presumed dead in the South Pacific island chain.

Authorities canceled tsunami warnings on more distant coasts.

Local officials reported that two 1.5-meter (4 foot, 11-inch) waves hit the western side of Santa Cruz Island, damaging between 70 and 80 homes and properties, said George Herming, a spokesman for the prime minister. Many villagers had headed to higher ground as a precaution, he said.

Dozens of aftershocks stronger than magnitude 5 followed the quake.

Solomon Islands Police Commissioner John Lansley said local police patrols reported that several people were presumed dead, though the reports were still being verified.

"Sadly, we believe some people have lost their lives," he said. "At the moment we potentially know of four, but there may of course be more."

One of the people presumed dead was fishing in a dugout canoe when the first wave hit, sweeping him out to sea, Herming said. Officials were searching for his body. Another woman was believed to have drowned when the water rushed into her village, Herming said.

Four villages on Santa Cruz were hit by the waves, with two facing severe damage, Lansley said. Other areas of the Solomons did not appear to have been seriously affected.

Disaster officials were struggling to reach the remote area after the tsunami flooded the airstrip at the nearest airport and left it littered with debris.

The tsunami formed after a magnitude-8.0 earthquake struck near the town of Lata, on Santa Cruz in Temotu, the easternmost province in the Solomons, about a 3-hour flight from the capital, Honiara. Temotu has a population of around 30,000.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center said a tsunami of about a meter (3 feet) was measured in Lata wharf. Smaller waves were recorded in Vanuatu and New Caledonia.

The center canceled warnings for tsunami waves further away.

Richard Dapo, a school principal on an island near Santa Cruz, said he lives inland but has been fielding calls from families on the coast whose homes were damaged by the waves.

"I try to tell the people living on the coastline, 'Move inland, find a higher place. Make sure to keep away from the sea. Watch out for waves,'" he said.

He said he heard the waves swamped some smaller islands, although he was not aware of any deaths or serious injuries. He said it was difficult to contact people because cellphone coverage was patchy in the region.

In Honiara, the warnings prompted residents to flee for higher ground.

"People are still standing on the hills outside of Honiara just looking out over the water, trying to observe if there is a wave coming in," said Herming, the prime minister's spokesman.

Atenia Tahu, who works for the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corp. in Honiara, said most people were remaining calm.

"People around the coast and in the capital are ringing in and trying to get information from us and the National Disaster Office and are slowly moving up to higher ground," Tahu said. "But panic? No, no, no, people are not panicking."

Dr. Rooney Jagilly, the medical superintendent at the National Referral Hospital in Honiara, said the hospital asked about half its 200 patients to leave and stay with families or friends as a precautionary measure because the hospital is located near the shoreline. Those patients who weren't mobile enough to move stayed, but the hospital remained ready to evacuate them.

Jagilly said there had been no flooding and he hoped the hospital would return to normal Thursday. He said his staff was ready to mobilize to Santa Cruz because the small hospital there has no doctor after the previous one recently died.

An official at the disaster management office in Vanuatu said there were no reports of damage or injuries there.

More than 50 people were killed and thousands lost their homes in April 2007 when a magnitude-8.1 quake hit the western Solomon Islands, sending waves crashing into coastal villages.

The Solomons comprise more than 200 islands with a population of about 552,000 people. They lie on the "Ring of Fire"—an arc of

earthquake and volcanic zones that stretches around the Pacific Rim and where about 90 percent of the world's quakes occur.

The U.S. Geological Survey said Wednesday's quake struck 81 kilometers (50 miles) west of Lata at a depth of 28.7 kilometers (17.8 miles).

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