EARTHQUAKE AND TSUNAMI IN SOLOMON ISLANDS - Update #6

Reporting date and time: Wednesday, 4 April 2007, 17:43 (CET)

Crisis: Earthquake followed by tsunami

Magnitude: 8 Mw

Depth: 10 km

Time: UTC/GMT (Greenwich time): 01-04-07 8:39:56 PM

Local Time: 2 April 2007 at 7:39:56 AM

Location (Lat/Long): -8.4528 | 156.9567

Background
A powerful earthquake struck off the Solomon Islands on Monday, April 2 sending a tsunami wave crashing into villages on the country’s west coast. The quake, with magnitude 8.1, triggered tsunami warnings throughout the South Pacific and as far north as Hawaii; however, officials cancelled the alert after the danger period passed.
Choiseul, New Georgia Islands and Shortland Islands in Western Province are among the worst affected areas. The worst damage is reported on Gizo Island.

Limited damage was caused by the tsunami in areas of Papua New Guinea including Kangu Wharf, Buin and Torokina (Bougainville), Lae and Rossel Island (Milne Bay Province).

Western province has a population of 80,000. However, the areas affected are home to approximately 10,000 people, of which 5,000 in Gizo town.

Assessment
The National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) of Western and Choiseul Provinces organized an assessment mission on 2 April. The assessment team included representatives of the NDC, the Government ministries, the police department, the Red Cross, NZ Aid and UNDP. Several other assessments are ongoing from IFRC and various NGOs however, on site assessments have yet to be made in several areas. Shortage of essential medicines and dressing material in several health institutions; limited number of health staff; shortage of safe water and sanitation system, mosquito nets and shelter were the main assessment findings.

The NDMO puts the current death toll at 34, with several dozen missing and approx 100 injured. 5,500 people are thought to have been displaced in total. NDMO estimates that 1,500 people are displaced on Gizo Island, most of whom are now living in make-shift settlements in the hills above Gizo town.

The hospital in Gizo is reportedly damaged beyond use. A temporary hospital has been established. At the time of the NDMO assessment, there were 30 patients under temporary tarpaulins. 15 were patients prior to the disaster. The hospital was run by three local doctors and three medical students. Three TB patients were accommodated in separate tends. The Sasamungga hospital has also been damaged. The worst-injured have been evacuated to Honiara. In addition, there are reports that health facilities in Vella de la Vella (Maravari) and shortlands (Toumoa) have been badly damaged. 50 percent of all health centres in the affected areas are suffering radio outages.

Coordination
Govt. has declared the areas affected by the event as National Disaster Areas. The National Disaster Council (NDC) as full authority in those areas.

NDC has the responsibility to manage relief items arriving at either wharves or airports in Honiara. The Chair of NDC and the Commissioner of Police are in charge for that.

The Government's response is coordinated by the NDMO and NDC, chaired by the Department of Home Affairs. Several Action Desks have been formed. They are: Infrastructure; Marine; Public Service; Supplies (all supplies except medical/health); Media; NGO; Health; Education. The action desks are physically located within the NDC building (near parliament). They will have at least one person routinely stationed there to answer and direct all questions/issues under their bailiwick. e.g. all things health, including requests from donors, activities (related to health) of donors (e.g. NGOs sending over their own staff on their own or hired boats), determination of appropriateness of donations, etc.

Health has established a Working Group as a satellite body of the Health Action Desk at central MoH. WHO is member of this group. The Group serves to advise/recommend actions, determine needs, etc. The Group meet daily. The Permanent Secretary Chairs this group.

UN Country Team is discussing the opportunity to activate the cluster mechanism.

National response
The Government of the Solomon Islands (GoSI) and the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) have deployed 3 search and rescue teams.
The MoH sent over 3 doctors and 10 nurses to the affected area.

The Government, through the Disaster Management Council and other agencies, has arranged for the immediate dispatching of tents, food and water supply. Medical supplies/kits, mosquito nets (treated long lasting), insecticides, sprayers, etc. are packaged and ready as are teams to distribute materials and conduct spraying.

MoH plans to set up 8 large emergency field units - 4 in hospitals and 4 in large rural clinics. Each unit should cover the medical needs of 10,000 people for 3 months

**International response**

UNICEF has pre-positioned emergency medical supplies in the Solomon Islands. The UNICEF Pacific Emergency Focal Point has been mobilized.

The Red Cross will carry out an initial distribution of First Aid kits in Gizo town and has dispatched a boat containing tents.

Federation (IFRC) has released a DREF fund (40,000 EUR) as a first response. The funds will support the costs for the assessment team and first relief items (Family Kits for 2,000 homeless people = 500 families).

The international Caritas Confederation would look to respond through the local Caritas and through Caritas Australia and Caritas New Zealand depending on the humanitarian situation.

Beyond immediate aid, World Vision is making plans to restore water and sanitation to affected communities, as the international relief and development agency has one of the leading teams in the Solomon Islands with this skill set.

Australian NGOs are currently coordinating with local authorities to plan the best response, and more information will become available once needs assessments have been conducted. There are currently 14 ACFID (Australian Council for International Development) members working in the Solomon Islands.

A 5 person UNDAC team is being deployed by OCHA to the Solomon Islands at the request of the Government.

The UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) is deploying one staff member to provide security coverage to the team. Telecoms Sans Frontieres, Bangkok office, has, also, been requested to deploy a detachment to support the UNDAC team.

AusAID is deploying a health assessment team (comprised of health specialists based in the Solomon Islands) to assess both immediate and longer-term health sector reconstruction needs. The team will liaise closely with SI Govt assessment teams, UNICEF and WHO.

New Zealand is making an initial $500,000 contribution to the Solomon Islands, as well as providing humanitarian supplies in the wake of yesterday’s earthquake and tsunami, Foreign Minister Winston Peters announced today.

As part of the AUS$2 million commitment, Australia will provide over half a million dollars to Caritas, the Australian Red Cross, World Vision and Oxfam – non-government organizations based in the Solomon Islands to feed, house and improve water supplies to affected communities.

UNICEF offered assistance to support 4 units and WHO and others partners are making arrangements to support the remaining 4.

**WHO action**
WHO response is coordinated through the Program of Emergency and Humanitarian Action of the Regional Office for Western Pacific based in Manila and the Cluster of Health Action in Crises based in WHO Headquarters in Geneva

Dr. Joel Vandemberg, WHO Country Liaison Officer, is in contact with the Undersecretary for Health Services to receive updates on emergency health needs. WHO is, also, participating in NDC meetings. WHO has offered assistance to the Government.

Mr. Paula Turaga, Emergency and Humanitarian Action Programme staff based in WHO office in Suva, has been deployed to provide support to the WHO Solomon Islands office.

The WHO office will be providing technical support and will be mobilizing resources for malaria control activities in response to the disaster.

**Source of information:**
EHA/WPRO, WHO Solomon Islands, WHO South Pacific, UN media

**Technical guidelines**