

Beat: Travel

Tsunami kills 7, destroys hundreds of houses in the Solomon Islands

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USPA News - A major earthquake struck the South Pacific Ocean near the Solomon Islands on Wednesday afternoon, triggering a tsunami which destroyed entire villages and claimed the lives of at least seven people, officials said on Thursday. The 8.0-magnitude earthquake at 12:12 p.m. local time (0112 GMT) was centered about 76 kilometers (47 miles) west of Lata, the provincial capital of Temotu Province on Nendo island, which is part of the Santa Cruz Islands in the Solomon Islands.

It struck about 28.7 kilometers (17.8 miles) deep, making it a shallow earthquake, according to the United States Geological Survey (USGS). The violent tremors were widely felt across nearby islands, where computer models suggest more than 14,000 people may have felt "very strong" to "severe" shaking. Another 26,000 people on islands near the epicenter may have experienced light to strong shaking, seismologists said. The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a tsunami warning for nearby countries within six minutes after the earthquake struck, although many residents on nearby islands already fled to higher grounds when they felt the tremors. The tsunami warning included the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu, New Caledonia, Kosrae, Fiji, Kiribati, and Wallis and Futuna. Most people were able to flee inland or to higher ground before the tsunami arrived, destroying hundreds of houses and sweeping fishing boats out to sea. "Our staff in Temotu province felt the quake and within five minutes there were a number of wave surges which flooded the runway there," said Andrew Catford of humanitarian agency World Vision. Jared Berends, who is the operations director for World Vision in the Solomon Islands, said it believes several villages were severely impacted by the tsunami. "World Vision is working to confirm the extent of damage and understand the immediate humanitarian needs," he said. The Solomon Times Online, a local news organization, said seven people were confirmed to have been killed while an unknown number of others remain missing. It said at least 376 houses were destroyed, including 200 houses in Nea village alone and 100 houses in Venga village. World Vision staff said Lata's local airport and four surrounding villages with a total population of around 800 people were flooded by the tsunami. "I am currently walking through one community and I'm knee-deep in water," said Jeremiah Tabua, World Vision's emergency response coordinator in the Solomon Islands. "I can see a number of houses that have been swept away by the surge." The United Nations (UN) Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), which emphasized early warning systems worked as expected, said the tsunami may have seriously affected more than 5,000 people. But a number of remote areas had still not been heard from on early Thursday morning, and it is likely they received no warning. "This latest disaster event underlines the vulnerability of all these small low-lying islands to sea level rise," said Jerry Velasquez of UNISDR. "Many islands such as Vanuatu and Kiribati are already suffering from recurrent flooding. More action needs to be taken at the international level to increase their capacities to deal with what is now seen as inevitable." The West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center said a buoy observed a tsunami wave with a height of 1 meter (3.4 feet) above tide level near Lata Wharf in the Solomon Islands, but the waves which impacted land are likely to have been larger. Witnesses said the tsunami traveled up to 500 meters (546 yard) inland in some areas. Tsunami waves were also observed in the city of Luganville in Vanuatu, where the government urged local residents to evacuate coastal areas and move to higher grounds. "Tsunami was observed in Luganville but was non-destructive," the government said in a brief statement. Tsunami watches were also issued for a number of other countries in the wider region, including New Zealand, American Samoa, Samoa, Australia, Indonesia, Guam, and Belau. Tsunami sirens were set off in New Zealand and people in coastal areas were being told to stay off beaches and out of the sea. The Solomon Islands are on the so-called 'Pacific Ring of Fire', an arc of fault lines circling the Pacific Basin that is prone to frequent and large earthquakes. The Solomon Islands arc as a whole experiences a very high level of earthquake activity, and many tremors of magnitude 7 and larger have been recorded since the early decades of the twentieth century. On April 2, 2007, a massive 8.1-magnitude earthquake struck close to the New Georgia Islands of the Solomon Islands. It unleashed a regional tsunami, killing 52 people and destroying more than 300 homes, schools and a hospital at Sasamunga. Two people were killed as a result of landslides, which were triggered by the earthquake.

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