



Tsunami Spares US, Takes Aim at Japan

Pacific Tsunami takes aim at Japan after sparing the US, much of Latin America

By MARK NIESSE

The Associated Press

HONOLULU

With a rapt world watching the drama unfold on live television, a tsunami raced across a quarter of the globe on Saturday and set off fears of a repeat of the carnage that caught the world off guard in Asia in 2004.

The tsunami delivered nothing more than a glancing blow to the U.S. and South Pacific, but Japan was still bracing for a direct hit and waves up to 10 feet high. Scientists worried the giant wave could gain strength as it rounds the planet and consolidates.

The tsunami was spawned by a ferocious magnitude-8.8 earthquake in Chile that sent waves barreling north across the Pacific at the speed of a jetliner. But Pacific islands had ample time to prepare because the quake struck several thousand miles away.

By the time the tsunami hit Hawaii — a full 16 hours after the quake — officials had already spent the morning ringing emergency sirens, blaring warnings from airplanes and ordering residents to higher ground.

The islands were back to paradise by the afternoon, but residents endured a severe disruption and scare earlier in the day: Picturesque beaches were desolate, million-dollar homes were evacuated, shops in Waikiki were shut down, and residents lined up at supermarkets to stock up on food and at gas stations.

Others parked their cars along higher ground to watch the ocean turbulence, and one brave soul stayed behind and surfed before being urged by an emergency helicopter pilot to get out of the water.

There were no immediate reports of widespread damage, injuries or deaths in the U.S. or in the Pacific islands, but a tsunami that swamped a village on an island off Chile killed at least five people and left 11 missing.

Waves hit California, but barely registered amid stormy weather. A surfing contest outside San Diego went on as planned.

Despite Internet rumors of significant problems in coastal areas of California, no injuries or major property damage occurred.

It was still possible that the tsunami would gain strength again as it heads to Japan, and nearly 50 countries and island chains remained under tsunami warnings from Antarctica to Russia. That's what happened in 1960, when a deadly tsunami killed dozens of people in Hilo, Hawaii, then went on to claim some 200 lives in Japan.

Hawaii had originally prepared to bear the brunt of the damage, but the tsunami was smaller than anticipated.

"We dodged a bullet," said Gerard Fryer, a geophysicist for the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Hawaii.

The tsunami raised fears that the Pacific could fall victim to the type of killer waves that killed 230,000 people in the Indian Ocean in 2004 the morning after Christmas. During that disaster, there was little to no warning and much confusion about the impending waves.

Officials said the opposite occurred after the Chile quake: They overstated their predictions for the size of the waves and the threat.

"We expected the waves to be bigger in Hawaii, maybe about 50 percent bigger than they actually were," Fryer said. "We'll be looking at that."

The Navy moved more than a half dozen vessels to try to avoid damage from the tsunami. A frigate, three destroyers and two smaller vessels were being sent out of Pearl Harbor and a cruiser out of Naval Base San Diego, the Navy said.

The tsunami caused a series of surges in Hawaii that were about 20 minutes apart, and the waves arrived later and smaller than originally predicted. The highest wave at Hilo measured 5.5 feet (1.7 meters) high, while Maui saw some as high as 2 meters (6.5 feet).

Water began pulling away from shore off Hilo Bay on the Big Island just before noon, exposing reefs and sending dark streaks of muddy, sandy water offshore. Waves later washed over Coconut Island, a small park off Hilo's coast.

"We've checked with each county. There was no assessment of any damage in any county, which was quite remarkable," said Hawaii Gov. Linda Lingle. "It's just wonderful that nothing happened and no one was hurt or injured."

Officials in Tonga and the Samoas evacuated coastal residents and used radio, television and mobile phone text messages to alert residents.

Sea surges hit 6 1/2 feet at several places in New Zealand. Waters at Tutukaka, a coastal dive spot near the top of the North Island, looked like a pot boiling with the muddy bottom churning up as sea surges built in size through the morning, sucking sea levels below low water marks before surging back.

A nude photo shoot involving scores of people scheduled for the coastline near the capital, Wellington, was canceled by the tsunami threat before any of the volunteers could strip.

Australia warned of the possibility of dangerous waves, strong ocean currents and flooding from Queensland state in the north to Tasmania in the south. No evacuations were ordered.

Past South American earthquakes have had deadly effects across the Pacific.

A tsunami after a magnitude-9.5 quake that struck Chile in 1960, the largest earthquake ever recorded, killed about 140 people in Japan, 61 in Hawaii and 32 in the Philippines. It was about 3.3 to 13 feet (one to four meters) in height, Japan's Meteorological Agency said.

Associated Press writers Jaymes Song and Greg Small in Honolulu; Kristen Gelineau in Sydney, Chris Havlik in Phoenix, Ray Lilley in Wellington, New Zealand; Eric Talmadge in Tokyo; Alan Clendenning in Sao Paulo,

Brazil; Tiphaine Issele in Papette, French Polynesia; Pauline Jelinek in Washington; and Charmaine Noronha in Toronto contributed to this report.

Copyright 2010 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.

Copyright © 2010 ABC News Internet Ventures