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Solomon Islands Tsunami: 1,000 Homeless

By AP

(HONIARA, Solomon Islands) — Landslides and a tsunami unleashed by a major earthquake destroyed some 200 houses on one Solomon island, leaving about one-third of the population homeless, a disaster management official said Tuesday.

Visual assessments from the air showed extensive damage on a remote western island after a 7.2-magnitude temblor struck near the Pacific Solomon Islands on Monday, said disaster management office director Loti Yates.

No injuries have been reported some 30 hours after the biggest in a series of quakes churned a tsunami wave that was up to 10 feet (3 meters) high as it plowed into the coast, officials said.

However, more than 1,000 people have been affected after some 200 houses were destroyed on Rendova, an island some 190 miles (300 kilometers) from the capital Honiara. Only 3,600 people live on Rendova.

Photographs taken from police helicopters Tuesday showed debris lining the foreshore and damaged houses on the coasts of Rendova and Tetepare, as well as deep scars on hills and cliffs caused by landslides.

Hillsides crashed down and the tsunami inundated homes Monday, but residents' memories of earlier disasters probably helped prevent any casualties, officials and residents said.

In April 2007, an 8.1 temblor unleashed a tsunami that killed more than 50 people. A quake-churned tsunami that killed more than 200 on nearby Samoa and Tonga in September was another reminder, locals said.

"People are very sensitive, as a quake conjures up memories and people immediately begin going to higher ground," police commissioner Peter Marshall told The Associated Press.

"The fact it was daylight, the isolated nature of the wave and that the landslides were in a relatively sparsely populated area" also helped, he said.

The largest quake — magnitude 7.2 — happened about 9:30 a.m. local time Monday and caused the tsunami to hit the coast a short time later. At least nine other quakes greater than magnitude 5.0 have rocked the earthquake-prone region since.

In the provincial capital Gizo, dive shop owner Danny Kennedy said the general rule is that "if there's anything more than 20 seconds of shaking or any sea water recedes, head for the hills."

A police boat patrolled Tuesday to check the coastline, where many homes are at sea level, making them vulnerable to tsunamis, National Disaster Management Office spokesman Julian Makaa said. No casualties had been reported so far, he said.

One village, Retavo, home to about 20 people, was reportedly completely inundated by a wall of sea water up to 10 feet (3 meters) high, but Makaa said no deaths or injuries had been reported there.

Emergency food, water and tarpaulins were being shipped in.

The Solomon Islands 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.

Associated Press writer Ray Lilley contributed to this report from Wellington, New Zealand.

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