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Solomons quakes, tsunami leave debris, land scars

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HONIARA, Solomon Islands -- Earthquakes and a tsunami that slammed the Solomon Islands sent hillsides crashing down and inundated homes, but residents' memories of earlier disasters probably helped prevent any casualties, officials and residents said Tuesday.

No injuries were 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 a remote region in the nation's west on Monday.

Authorities were still trying to reach hard-hit areas on Rendova and Tetepare islands, and to account for an unknown number of people believed to have fled their villages, police commissioner Peter Marshall told The Associated Press.

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, 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.

Residents said past disasters made them better prepared this time.

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," Marshall said.

"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.

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.

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Another disaster management official, Loti Yates, said earlier at least 16 houses were destroyed and 32 damaged in Baniata village on Rendova, an island some 190 miles (300 kilometers) from the capital, Honiara, where about 3,600 people live.

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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