

Aftershock forces plane to turn back from disaster area

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A damaged house after a tsunami hit the Venga village in the Solomon Islands
- Source: World Vision

A strong aftershock has stopped a plane carrying officials and supplies from landing in a disaster struck area of the Solomon Islands.

ONE News Pacific Correspondent Barbara Dreaver was on the plane heading for Lata which bore much of the brunt of a 8.0 magnitude quake which struck the Solomons on Wednesday.

Nine people are dead and many more are missing after a one metre surge followed the initial quake.

Dreaver told ONE News the plane, carrying the Solomons Prime Minister and members of his Cabinet as well as aid officials, was about to land when they were told a massive earthquake had damaged the runway.

The US Geological Survey said the 6.6 magnitude aftershock struck 412

kilometres east of the Solomon Islands. It said there was a low likelihood of casualties and damage.

Dreaver says Prime Minister Gordon Lillo is about to declare a state of emergency for affected islands in the Santa Cruz area.

She said Lillo is anxious to get supplies to the area and there is a real fear over medical supplies.

"There are no doctors in the affected areas and nurses working up to 20 hours a day are extremely tired.

"They need support as soon as possible," said Dreaver.

A patrol boat which left last night with some supplies and support staff on board should get to the area tonight. And an Australian Air Force plane is due to carry out a proper aerial grid search to assess the situation.

Worse than first thought

Dreaver said the scope of the disaster is much worse than initially thought and up to 20 villages have been affected. Authorities still don't know the fate of some of the more outlying villages, especially in the reef islands.

Nine people are dead and many more are missing after a one metre surge struck following an 8.0 magnitude quake, 340 kilometres east Kirakira.

And as the recovery gets under way the US Geological Survey has reported another quake with a strong 6.6 magnitude has struck 412 kilometres east of the Solomon Islands this morning. The tremor was the latest in a series of aftershocks but the USGS said there was a low likelihood of casualties and damage.

Dreaver says it is now known that about 6500 people are displaced or homeless and many have lost track of family members. She said the Red Cross has set up a tracking system to help reunite and inform loved ones.

Dreaver said the disaster is devastating and fresh water and clothing is urgently needed.

"Many people have no clothes at all, everything was washed away."

Entire villages have been washed away and Dreaver said there is debris everywhere.

"The force behind the metre high wave swept everything in its path, especially in low-lying areas."

She said a lot of the people who are missing or who died are elderly or children who couldn't run away in time.

New Zealand has contributed an initial sum of \$200,000 for urgent supplies and support and Dreaver said the aid agencies have swung into action very quickly.

World Vision was already on the ground in the Solomons when the tsunami struck with 20 people there doing another project and aid agencies are working together with the United Nations to try to get help to the people as soon as possible.

Solomon Islands authorities, including the Prime Minister, some of his Cabinet and the New Zealand and Australian high commissioners, are taking a chartered flight today to see for themselves exactly what is needed.

Urgent need for supplies



There is hope that stricken Solomon Islanders will receive emergency supplies today as the island chain comes to terms with the damage done by Wednesday's tsunami.

It has been nearly impossible to reach to most devastated areas so far but aid agencies are hopeful they will get supplies to where they are needed most today.

The airport in Lata is covered in debris but is expected to be reopened this morning.

A series of metre high waves crashed through coastal villages leaving many with nowhere to hide.

"Some of those islands wouldn't be a metre out of the sea and a wave of even 0.9 of a metre would have a significant impact," said Red Cross Disaster Manager Tim McInerney.

"People have nowhere to go, they will have to climb coconut trees to try and get away."

World Vision's Dr Andrew Cutford told ONE News via Skype that one of the immediate activities was getting together as many shelter kits as possible until more permanent buildings can be constructed.

"We are also expecting to provide water containers, people won't be able to access their usual safe drinking water, so we'll need to be able to provide them with containers to be able to travel further or access water systems set up by response agencies such as Red Cross."

World Vision said 700 homes have been damaged and the number of people needing help was "growing by the moment".

The Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) says four schools have been destroyed by the tsunami.

PEZA said water supply to Lata is contaminated and has been cut-off.