

PAPUA NEW GUINEA: TIDAL WAVE

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The Disaster

A tidal wave, said to be up to ten metres high, hit the north coast of Papua New Guinea, near the town of Aitape on Friday night, shortly after an offshore earthquake measuring seven on the Richter scale. First reports speak of 70 dead and several hundred missing. The death toll could reach 1,000, say eyewitnesses. Bodies litter the coast and hundreds of people have fled into the jungle, seeking higher ground.

The village of Arop, and three other villages, home to around 10,000 people have been completely destroyed, say Catholic priests working in the extremely remote province of West Sepik. The region is so inaccessible that it is expected to be days before the full extent of the disaster is known. Rescue teams from the capital, Port Moresby, have been despatched. Helicopters are being used to search for survivors and food shipments are on the way, according to the Government's National Disaster Centre.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The five-strong Delegation in Port Moresby is preparing an assessment to the affected area, as well as an initial emergency response. An experienced Delegate is being transferred from the relief operation on the strife-torn island of Bougainville, and the Port Moresby-based Logistics, Medical and Water/Sanitation Delegates are expected to move to the disaster zone as soon as air transport can be organised. The International Federation's Under-secretary General for Disaster Response and Operations Co-ordination has approved a grant of CHF 50,000 from the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund to kick-start relief operations.

An emergency stock of food and shelter material exists in Mount Hagen, midway between the capital and Aitape. The Delegation plans to move these supplies to the disaster zone as soon as possible.

The Federation's Regional Delegation in Suva, Fiji, will assist with personnel (Disaster Preparedness Delegate) and technical expertise as required.

The Federation and Papua New Guinea Red Cross Society has gained extensive experience in emergency operations, responding to disasters provoked by the unrest on Bougainville and a drought in the interior of the country.

Needs

Full needs will not be known until Red Cross personnel arrive in the area to make an assessment and will be communicated to donors as soon as they are known. For more information contact Marcel Fortier, Desk Officer, on ++4122 7304268, mobile: 079 2173310, email:fortier@ifrc.org

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding and Reporting Department

Hiroshi Higashiura
Director
Asia and Pacific Department