



PHOTO: AFP
This photo taken on Tuesday after an 8.0-magnitude quake struck in the early morning offshore shows people inspecting the damage in Pago Pago in American Samoa. The huge earthquake churned up a giant tsunami that devastated the Samoa islands, killing at least 113 people as it tore through resorts and villages.

Samoan tourist resorts 'devastated' by tsunami

AFP, Apia

Samoan tourist resorts had been "devastated" by a violent quake and tsunami which hit the tiny Pacific island nation Tuesday, the deputy prime minister said as holidaymakers recounted horrifying scenes.

Misa Telefoni said the powerful waves which killed at least 47 people in the country had smashed into upmarket island resorts off the coast of the main island of Upolu after the 8.0-magnitude quake.

"We've heard that most of the resorts are totally devastated on that side of the island," he told Australian Associated Press.

"We've had a pretty grim picture painted of all that coast."

Telefoni said that his cousin Joe Annandale, who owns the upmarket Sinalei Reef Resort, was in a critical condition in hospital and that his cousin's wife had drowned.

As officials confirmed that two South Koreans and an Australian were among the dead, holidaymakers said that some areas had been completely flattened.

"There will be people in a great lot of need round here," New Zealand tourist Graeme Ansell told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation from Upolu.

"It's flattened, it's just flattened. It was very quick and it's flattened."

Wendy Booth, who owns the Sea Breeze resort, said she and her husband clung to a handrail to stop being sucked out to sea.

"The second wave hit and came up through the floor, pushed out the back door and threw us outside," she told commercial radio.

"We managed to hang on to a handrail. My husband and I just hung on to each other and the handrail and then that one (wave) went but the suckout was tremendous."

"The force of the wave took furniture through the roof. The furniture was pushed with the ferocity of the wave through the ceiling."

Another witness, Tony Manson, said the resort had been destroyed.

"The lagoon is awash with debris," he said. "I don't know how many are dead, I know people are down there retrieving bodies at the moment."

New Zealand said one of its nationals was feared dead and that more tourists could have died because the waves hit during a busy school holiday period.

"We have one reliable but as yet unconfirmed report of a New Zealand death," acting Prime Minister Bill English said.

"We are of course concerned that there may be more given that the tsunami struck an area in Samoa where there are several resorts, and it's during the school holidays when a number of our Samoan-New Zealand families go back to Samoa."

Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith confirmed areas where there were major tourist facilities appeared worst hit by the surge of water.

"In Samoa it's really especially the southeast of the island that's been hit and that's unfortunately where a lot of both the luxury resorts and the budget resorts are, and of course we're concerned there may be Australians holidaying there," he said.

Tourism is a major industry for Samoa, which boasts a year-round warm climate, pristine beaches and lush tropical rainforests.

Pacific alert system worked well in tsunami: UN

AFP, Paris

Pacific tsunami monitors issued an immediate alert after the major quake that struck off Samoa on Tuesday, but the islands' closeness to the epicentre may have boosted the death toll, the United Nations said yesterday.

"The alert system worked well. The tsunami alert centre in Honolulu (Hawaii) immediately issued a warning to the various countries in the network," said Badaoui Rouhban, director of the section for disaster reduction at the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) in Paris.

"After a warning is received, it is up to local authorities to respond to it," he told AFP.

"According to the locality, the alert is then issued by radio, by television, sometimes by ringing church bells or other means... we do not yet have a report as to the response."

Roman Emperor Nero's revolving dining room found

ANI, London

A team of archaeologists in Rome has claimed to have found the remains of a legendary revolving dining room built by Emperor Nero to impress his guests.

According to a report in The Guardian, digging on the Palatine Hill, archaeologists stumbled on the remnants of a circular room, 16 metres (53ft) in diameter, which they believe formed part of Nero's palace, built in the first century AD.

Sixty years after Nero's reign, the historian Suetonius wrote that the dining room revolved "night and day, in imitation of the motion of the celestial bodies".

Archaeologists have yet to determine how the room revolved. Known as the Domus Aurea, or Golden Room, the palace also featured an artificial lake and was dominated by a 100-foot statue of Nero.

Storm Ketsana leaves 331 dead across SE Asia

AFP, Hoi An

Typhoon Ketsana extended its destructive rampage through Southeast Asia yesterday, blowing away whole villages in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos as the regional death toll rose to 331.

The storm has unleashed some of the worst flooding in a decade to hit the region, having already submerged most of the Philippine capital at the weekend, and governments are struggling to help more than two million survivors.

"I have never seen such a strong wind in my life," Pang Phot, a police officer in Cambodia's badly hit Sandann district, told AFP by telephone.

"Many wooden houses were immediately blown away and many others collapsed to the ground. It was raining heavily and people could not flee their homes because the wind hit immediately," he said.

Ketsana killed 246 people in the Philippines while still a

weaker tropical storm, before strengthening over the South China Sea and smashing into Vietnam on Tuesday, leaving another 74 dead from flooding and landslides.

It moved inland to lash Cambodia overnight, killing 11 more people, and caused meter-high floods in Laos on Wednesday where it was downgraded to a tropical depression.

Authorities in northeastern Thailand were also on high alert but said there had been no damage yet.

Hungry and stranded survivors were marooned on rooftops in flooded parts of central Vietnam, complaining of a slow government response to their plight.

In the historic tourist town of Hoi An, a Unesco world heritage site, some people were trapped on the metal roofs of their homes until soldiers arrived by boat to rescue them, AFP reporters saw.

"We have not received any support from local authorities," a 28-year-old mother of

twin toddlers said in nearby Dien Ban district, Quang Nam province, where the typhoon made landfall on Tuesday night.

On Tuesday flooding hit parts of the major city of Danang as well as Hue, the former capital and another World Heritage site.

"Our aid work is very difficult, even with a greater mobilisation from the soldiers and the police, because the scale of the flooding is too vast and we lack equipment," said Phan Nhu Nghia, president of the Vietnamese Red Cross in Danang.

Officials and the UN estimated around 200,000 people in Vietnam had fled their homes. Five hundred and thirty homes had collapsed and 100,000 others were flooded or damaged, they said.

In Cambodia, authorities said the homes of thousands of people had been evacuated as the storm packed winds of up to 145 kilometres (90 miles) an hour.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents navigate by boats on a flooded street following the passage of the Typhoon Ketsana in the tourist town of Hoi An in central Vietnamese province of Quang Nam yesterday while a woman holds her son in thigh-deep floodwater at her home at Dien Nam commune.

Cracks deepen among supporters of Honduran coup

AP, Tegucigalpa

Cracks are deepening among supporters of Honduras' coup-imposed government, with business leaders softening their opposition to reinstating ousted President Manuel Zelaya and lawmakers threatening to revoke an emergency decree limiting civil liberties.

Zelaya said Tuesday night that he was encouraged by a plan proposed by an influential business chamber for putting him back in office and ending the crisis. The plan includes bringing foreign troops to Honduras to ensure that if Zelaya was restored to the presidency, he would respect an international mediator's proposal that his powers be strictly limited.

Zelaya said it was "good sign" that "conservative sectors of the country are analys-

ing a proposal" that includes his reinstatement.

"We will make the respective analysis," Zelaya said in an interview with Channel 11. "We hope to enter into talks with those who are making this proposal in the next hours."

Lawmakers, meanwhile, made clear Congress will revoke an emergency security crackdown if the interim government does not. Rigoberto Chang, a congressman with the conservative National Party, said Tuesday. Congress has the power to lift or modify the decree.

Interim President Roberto Micheletti backtracked on the decree Monday, saying he had agreed to reconsider the move at the request of congressional leaders. But the order appeared to remain in effect Tuesday.



PHOTO: AFP

Canadian space tourist and founder of Cirque du Soleil Guy Laliberte is seen during space suit testing prior to his blast off from a Russian leased Kazakh Baikonur cosmodrome yesterday in a Russian Soyuz TMA-16 rocket to the International Space Station (ISS) together with Russian cosmonaut Maxim Surayev and a US astronaut Jeff Williams.

Clown takes giant leap into space

AFP, Baikonur

The billionaire founder of the Cirque du Soleil show Wednesday blasted off on a Russian rocket to bring his trademark humour and acrobatic energy into the ultra-serious world of space flight.

Guy Laliberte, 50, a Canadian citizen, had spent millions on a personal fortune on his two-week visit to the International Space Station (ISS) but he could be the last such "space tourist" for several years.

He blasted off on schedule from Russia's Baikonur cosmodrome, located in neighbouring Kazakhstan, at 0714 GMT alongside a professional Russian cosmonaut and US astronaut.

Television pictures showed the three crew members waving at mission control from the cockpit of the Soyuz spacecraft as it headed into orbit with a toy lion-mascot dangling from the ceiling.

"All the work on the launch pad has been carried out according to plan. I wish you success and thank you for the good preparation," said the head of the Russian space agency Roskosmos, Anatoly Perminov, as he bade farewell.

Guinea bans rally after stadium bloodbath

AFP, Conakry

Guinea yesterday banned "subversive" gatherings as it announced two days of national mourning after troops killed at least 157 people in a brutal crackdown on an opposition rally.

The country's military ruler said he was sorry for the violence, but a human rights group alleged junta soldiers killed three more people outside the capital Conakry on Tuesday, a day after the crackdown, and kidnapped victims of the crackdown from hospitals.

"I declare a national mourning on Wednesday and Thursday," junta leader Captain Moussa Dadis Camara said on television. "Any mass gatherings which are of a subversive nature are banned."

Camara urged Christian and Muslim priests, political

and civic leaders and journalists to "abstain from acts that disrupt public order." He also asked for national prayers to be held on Friday and Sunday in memory of the dead.

On France's Europe 1 radio, Camara sought to distance himself from the bloodshed, saying: "I was overtaken by events. I can't control all the actions of this army. To say that I control this army would be demagoguery."

"I was bequeathed a half-century-old inheritance: an army in which a corporal can say 'screw you' to colonel or a general," he said.

Human rights activists reported fresh killings for a second day Tuesday.

"Today we recorded three more deaths from army shootings, two in Wanidara and one in Cosa," both neighbourhoods outside Conakry, said Thierno Maadjou Sow, an official with the Guinean

Organisation for the Defence of Human Rights.

"The young people went outside and the soldiers shot at them."

Sow also alleged that soldiers removed wounded people from hospitals and took them to unknown locations.

"Soldiers went to take away the injured being treated at the Donka hospital (in the capital) to bring them to an unknown destination as well as women who had been raped and were being treated at the local health centre in Ratoma (outside the capital)," he said.

The United Nations, African Union and European Union, the United States and Canada all expressed alarm over the killings, which took place Monday at a stadium where tens of thousands of people attended a rally against Camara.

Israel to swap 20 prisoners for info on captive soldier

AP, Jerusalem

Israel decided yesterday to free 20 Palestinian women from Israeli prisons in exchange for a videotape proving that a captive Israeli soldier held in the Gaza Strip is still alive.

The decision was the first tangible sign of movement in talks that have dragged on for more than three years after the release of the soldier, Sgt. Gilad Shalit.

In a statement, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said Wednesday that it expects Shalit's Hamas captors to release a recent videotape of the soldier. The deal is to be carried out on Friday.

The statement said Israel's Security Cabinet accepted the deal, put forward by Egyptian and German mediators, as a "confidence-building measure." It quoted a senior official in Netanyahu's office as saying the negotiations are still "expected to be long and difficult."

Justice denied for Bosnian war rape victims

AFP, Sarajevo

The Bosnian government has failed to deliver justice for thousands of women raped during the country's 1992-95 war, the human rights organisation Amnesty International said in a report Wednesday.

"Amnesty International is concerned that the Bosnia-Herzegovina authorities have investigated and prosecuted only a very limited number of cases of war crimes of sexual violence," the report said.

More than 13 years after the war ended "many perpetrators (of wartime rapes) continue to enjoy impunity and often live in the same communities as their victims," it said.

The London-based organisation said Bosnian authorities had also failed to provide "meaningful measures of support and protection" for the survivors.



PHOTO: AFP

Protestors demonstrate outside the Grand Hotel, Brighton where the Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak was due to speak at the Labour Party Friends of Israel Annual Reception on Tuesday. The protest was organised by the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign (PSC) at the annual Labour Party Conference.