

Address presented at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation seminar 'Earthquake and tsunami disaster in Samoa' by H.E Leiatua Dr. Kilifoti Eteuati, Ambassador of the Independent State of Samoa to Japan.

Wednesday 7 October, 2009

At 6:48am on Tuesday morning 29 September 2009 (Samoa local time), a major earthquake of 8.3 magnitude on the Richter Scale occurred at a depth of 18km and a distance of 190km (120 miles) directly south of Samoa. The epicenter was located at 15.509S, 172.034W. The earthquake generated a powerful tsunami which struck the south coast of Upolu island in Samoa within ten minutes of the earthquake occurring. The main wave was 3 to 6 metres high when it hit, and it continued surging inland for over a kilometre or when it reached high ground or steep cliffs nearer the shoreline. In the next twenty minutes, all the coastal areas on the south coastline of Upolu and Savaii, the two main islands of Samoa, as well as the smaller islands of Manono and Apolima which lie between the larger islands were hit, resulting in the loss of many lives, numerous injuries, and the extensive destruction of villages, tourism infrastructure, roads, electricity lines and water pipes, plantations, coral reefs and beaches, plants and animals. The south-coast of Upolu was worst hit with over 50 deaths caused by the tsunami in the village of Lalomanu alone.

The massive size of the earthquake, and the shallow location of the epicentre, resulted in the swift formation of a powerful tsunami travelling at high speed, and with the epicenter so close to Samoa the inhabitants and the visitors on the south coast of Upolu had little or no time to escape to safer ground. Many of those who died were old people and children; the able bodied people who perished were mostly engaged in efforts to get the old people and the children to safety.

As of 5pm yesterday evening, (Samoa local time), the devastation toll stood at 142 deaths, 7 missing, 335 injured with 32 serious cases; and about 5,000 people who have lost their homes. Seven of the people who died and one of the

missing persons were overseas visitors to Samoa. None of the dead or missing was from Japan. The death toll is expected to rise as many of the seriously injured people in hospital are not expected to survive, and as each hour passes, the likelihood of finding the missing persons alive becomes more remote. Several seriously injured people have been evacuated to New Zealand and Australia for further medical treatment.

Medical teams with emergency medical supplies from New Zealand started arriving later the same day the tsunami struck, and the members of the teams quickly joined the local Samoan medical personnel in the treatment of the tsunami victims. The Australian emergency service teams with supplies and equipment started arriving the following day. The overseas teams immediately found themselves dealing with very serious cases of injury. An Australian orthopaedic surgeon, Rob Atkinson, who has been treating patients in the tsunami ward in the main hospital in Apia commented that many of the injured have potentially fatal wounds. "They look as though they have been churned up in a massive, really dirty washing machine because they basically have been."

High chief Tuatagaloa Joe Annandale of Poutasi village, a prominent business and community leader who with his wife Tui owned and operated the internationally well-known boutique beach hotel called 'Sinalei' near Siumu village, provided in a radio interview the day after the tsunami struck, a graphic account of what it was like when the earthquake occurred and the tsunami struck with deadly impact on his family.

Tuatagaloa, his wife and his wife's 95-year-old mother were staying at the time at his house near the beach at Poutasi village where he holds his chiefly title. They were having morning prayers when the earthquake shook the house. After the prayers, his wife Tui noticed that the sea water was receding from the lagoon. They knew immediately that a tsunami wave was coming, and they rushed to prepare the old lady and her nurse and got them into the pick-up truck with Tuatagaloa at the wheel. Tui jumped on the truck tray. As they got into the truck, they saw the tsunami wave reach the lagoon, and rushing towards land at "amazing speed". He drove as hard as he could, but the wave caught up with the

truck, lifted it into the air and tumbled it violently for what seemed a very long time. When the truck finally came to a stop, he discovered that the old lady had sustained multiple injuries but she was still alive. He could not find his wife and after searching for about an hour she was found entangled on the branches of a tree. She was dead.

There were many similar accounts of people who knew of the deadly threat posed by the approaching tsunami, and who took immediate and desperate measures to try and escape, but who just did not have time to do so. One family which operated a popular visitor beach facility in Lalomanu village lost over 10 members in the tsunami onslaught.

There were also many stories of miraculous escape and survival. One such story was that of 4-year-old Fili Siaki of Satitua village, Aleipata, whose mother and 2-year-old brother were with him at their house near the beach when the tsunami struck. The mother and the younger brother died, but Fili survived. He said, "I was running when the wave hit me, I started drifting and tree branches and other objects hit me. I hung on to a tree branch and did not let go." He was swept to a plantation inland of a neighbouring village, Malaela. A cousin who had also been swept to the same plantation heard Fili calling out his father's name. He located him and carried him home to the amazement and utter delight of his father who was himself seriously injured. Fili has undergone operations to try and fix his damaged spinal cord and broken bones and there are high hopes for his long term survival.

As the medical teams continue to deal with the emergency cases, the medical authorities are already looking at the medium-term health implications. Dr. Limbo Fiu, Director of Health Services in Samoa said that more deaths will follow. "In a few weeks, we will see many people sick with gastroenteritis and diarrhoea. That will affect the young and the elderly mainly. Deaths are inevitable". The Red Cross Society of Samoa whose members have been working alongside the other local emergency services from the beginning, agreed with this prediction, saying that there were concerns with sanitation and the ready

availability of clean water, and strong coordinated efforts were needed to fend off emerging diseases.

The wide-spread destruction of well over a thousand family homes throughout Samoa has resulted in more than five thousand people being displaced and made homeless. Most of these people however have been located and rescued by relatives who live in other parts of the country which were not devastated by the tsunami. The urban area around the capital of Apia which is located on the north coast of Upolu and contain 25% of the population of 186,000 people, was not affected by the tsunami and neither were the villages situated along the north coast of both Upolu and Savaii. The rest of the displaced people were accommodated in public buildings or they moved to bushland on higher ground and started building temporary shelters for themselves.

While rescuing and looking after relatives and friends was an automatic and natural reaction by the Samoans whose social structure is based on close family relationships, this situation has resulted in overcrowding and associated difficulties. This situation is being dealt with. The most urgent concern however related to the plight of those people who have been so traumatized by their deadly tsunami experience that they have escaped into deep bushland (and refused to move out) where it was very difficult to get to them assistance by way of medical attention, clean water, shelter materials, food, tools and sanitation facilities. Members of the emergency services and the National Disaster Council assistance teams have been walking over rough terrain and working under difficult conditions to deliver assistance to these people.

The emergency response

When the earthquake subsided, the national disaster emergency services immediately swung into action as Samoa's national disaster plan was activated.

Medical personnel and police who were stationed in the affected areas provided immediate assistance where needed while at the same time sending reports via telephone and the internet to the capital of Apia to their respective headquarters and the headquarters of the National Disaster Council. Members of emergency services in Apia quickly gathered and were dispatched to the affected districts with medical supplies and equipment for search and rescue operations. These teams started reaching their destination after between 1-3 hours, depending on the distance of the affected villages from Apia, and the condition of the roads. They started operations on arrival providing medical assistance, and helping the survivors as needed. They followed the prescribed course of action for disaster situations as set out in their disaster response plan and for which they have trained.

The response was managed by the National Disaster Council (NDC) which was responsible for coordinating and managing the response in disaster situations in Samoa. This body's responsibilities and functions were updated in the 2007 Disaster and Emergency Act. Its membership includes the CEOs of the thirteen government Ministries and representatives from NGOs such as the Samoa Red Cross Society. It is chaired by the Prime Minister.

On the day the tsunami struck a Declaration of Disaster was made by the Acting Prime Minister under the 2007 Disaster and Emergency Act. On 2 October 2009, this Ministerial edict was replaced by the Declaration by the Head of State of a State of Emergency for Samoa under the Constitution: it will be in force for 30 days. Both these measures, allowed the emergency services to conduct their assistance operations without obstacles.

Samoa is prepared for natural disasters. Twice a year in the last three years, the NDC conducted nation-wide exercises where people were shown what to do in times of natural disasters. When this earthquake occurred, people throughout

Samoa responded quickly by moving to higher ground whether they heard tsunami warnings or not. The powerful earthquake which shook the country for over two minutes and the receding sea from the lagoon area were warning enough of an imminent dangerous tsunami. Official warnings have been immediately issued over the radio, and texted through mobile phones. The response operations were conducted efficiently and they were effective with the resources available to the emergency response teams.

Later the same day the tsunami struck, medical teams and supplies and other aid materials started arriving from New Zealand and later Australia. Other countries soon joined in offering assistance and as a result, a good supply of expert manpower assistance and a growing stockpile of emergency supplies have been made available to the Samoan authorities to meet the requirements of an effective response to the devastation caused by this major earthquake and powerful tsunami. More relief supplies are still urgently needed particularly in building and gardening tools, building materials for temporary shelters, and water storage containers/water tanks.

The damaged and blocked roads have been repaired to the extent that they have been opened to AWD vehicles, trucks and machinery. Most of the electricity supply is back on line, and the communications networks are operational again. The repairs to the water mains are almost completed but the emergency measures in this area including the delivery of clean water by water-trucks, and the distribution of water containers, as well as bottled water have been put in place immediately following the tsunami.

While the emergency phase continues, the government is already considering the medium and long-term response to the rehabilitation and the rebuilding after the devastation wrought by this powerful earthquake and destructive tsunami. This is the response phase where the assistance by the international community, including Japan, both government and non-government,

will be needed by Samoa. Even though Samoa is often referred to as a model for small developing countries due to the efficient way the government manages its small and fragile economy, as well as the enduring stability of its political, social and cultural institutions, it is a small island country with few natural resources. It depends heavily on tourism and on remittances from the Samoans who live overseas. Both these sources of money have been seriously affected by the global financial crisis. In brief, Samoa needs the help of the international community to rebuild after the devastation caused by the powerful tsunami which struck the islands of Samoa last week.

You have been provided with the basic information on Samoa, printed in Japanese and English, which should assist you in putting this address in context.

A brief background.

This is the worst natural disaster to have struck Samoa since records were kept from the early 1720s in terms of lives lost.

A powerful hurricane which struck Samoa in March 1889 killed 155 United States and German sailors who were on six warships (three United States & three German) anchored at Apia harbor at the time. The captains of these six warships however appeared to have deliberately decided to ride out the hurricane in Apia harbor, in their refusal to yield to the other as the two countries, together with Great Britain, contested control of Samoa. The captain of the one British warship present had decided to take his chances on the open sea and his ship, the Calliope, survived the hurricane.

The most recent major natural disasters which impacted Samoa occurred in February 1990 when cyclone Ofa struck causing 8 deaths and extensive devastation to all parts of Samoa, and Cyclone Valeria in December the following year which caused 11 deaths and repeated the extensive damage to all parts of the country which was still trying to recover from the Ofa destruction.

Japan and the international community assisted Samoa greatly after the devastation caused by these two cyclones. Sadly, Samoa has once again been placed in the situation where it has to ask for the assistance of the international community following the devastation wrought by the earthquake and the tsunami which struck the country last week.

Thank you.