

Australia's Humanitarian Aid

Samoa and Tonga—Tsunami

When Samoa and Tonga were hit by an 8.3 magnitude earthquake and tsunami on 29 September 2009, Australia was shocked by the devastation this tragedy inflicted on our neighbours. It killed 144 people, including five Australians, and in its wake lives, homes, businesses, communities and pristine beaches were in ruins.

Globally, the number and scale of disasters is increasing. The Asia-Pacific is the most natural disaster-prone region.

Australians responded with speed and compassion, providing \$13 million of assistance for immediate relief efforts, recovery and rebuilding. New Zealand and France joined Australia to coordinate assistance under the FRANZ Arrangement. Many areas of the Australian Government worked together to provide help, under Samoa and Tonga's leadership and direction.

At the peak of the tsunami response, 114 Australian medical and public health personnel, search and rescue teams, and logisticians were treating the injured, searching for survivors and identifying the deceased. Australian teams performed 101 surgical operations, 171 field medical treatments, 1060 emergency department presentations, 33 public health village assessments and 22 aero medical evacuations.

Australians donate more than \$100 million each year to help those affected by disasters and conflict overseas.

The Australian naval ship HMAS Tobruk helped AusAID deliver 218 tons of disaster and emergency relief supplies to the Pacific island nations. This included tarpaulins for shelter, blankets, water purification tablets and containers. In Samoa, more than 3000 people were living in temporary tents and under tarpaulins. In Tonga, on the island of Niuatoputapu, the tsunami killed nine people and destroyed most of the infrastructure.

Samoa's Prime Minister Tuilaepa Lupesoli'ai Sailele Malielegaoi said at the time: "Australia's very rapid and timely response in deploying personnel, medical teams, supplies and assets in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami was critical to the emergency and rescue operation. I would like to convey to the Government and the people of Australia, the deepest gratitude of our Government and people for the tremendous assistance and support provided by Australia in the wake of the tsunami disaster."

We help countries develop the skills needed to manage disasters themselves.

These skills also help countries to coordinate aid from other nations.

Samoa and Tonga's resilience, spirit and courage were evident throughout the crisis. Rebuilding began shortly after the disaster. Samoa declared it was 'open for business', encouraging tourists to contribute to the reconstruction efforts by visiting resorts on the unaffected side of the island.

In the affected areas, heavy machinery including earth-moving equipment, generators and cement mixers were sent to begin the enormous clean-up, including removing debris from the sea to save reef and coral. The Samoan and Tongan Governments' priorities were to rebuild infrastructure to enable access to essential services—concentrating on roads, water, power, health services and schools. Our support also helped the economic recovery through getting businesses back on their feet.

Australia is increasing its humanitarian work to help those in dire need.

With funding from AusAID, non-government organisations focussed on both physical rebuilding and emotional well-being. "We helped nearly 500 children return, and more than 500 youth and church leaders

from 16 villages took part in special counselling and training to help their communities deal with the trauma of the tsunami,” director of Caritas Samoa Puletini Tuala said.

Alataua, his wife Noela, six children and young grandson survived the tsunami but lost their home and belongings. The family plans to move into their new home (pictured) and rebuild their lives. “We are lucky to have this new home and one day soon, when we forget about the sea and the wave, we will return to this home. We thank Caritas and AusAID for all their help,” said Alataua.

We work in partnership around the world.

Humanitarian action is strongest when everyone works together.

During the crisis, staff and students from the AusAID-funded Australian Pacific Technical College (APTC) in Samoa used their training restaurant to make hundreds of hot lunches for staff, patients and families at the local hospital. They raised funds for the homeless and delivered humanitarian supplies.

With Australia’s support, the college ran a tailored course on housing maintenance and repairs to address a critical skills gap. Students then helped to rebuild houses and community facilities in the worst-affected villages. They graduated with a recognised Australian qualification and continued their study at the APTC’s Fiji campus.

Preparing for disasters and reducing their potential impact, protects lives and development progress.

Recovery work aims to build greater resilience, using this disaster as an opportunity to better prepare for and protect people from future disasters. One important preparedness priority was to quickly re-stock local disaster relief supplies, as the tsunami occurred just before the annual cyclone season. Risk reduction measures included supporting the Tongan Government to rebuild in locations above the wave zone, moving people out of harm’s way.

It will take many years for Samoa and Tonga to fully recover. Longer-term reconstruction efforts include improving disaster monitoring and warning systems and a trained volunteer emergency response team. Australia will continue to work with its neighbours. Disaster response is important.

More information about Australia’s humanitarian aid is available online at www.ausaid.gov.au