



WAVE OF SUPPORT

Samoans cherish family above all else, so although those who lost loved ones in the recent tsunami have been hit hard, their family ties on the island and across the sea in New Zealand and Australia will also be what heals them.

Words by Louise Elder

OPERATION RESCUE

Clockwise from far left: A car hangs from the wall of a building in Pago Pago Harbour after an earthquake caused a tsunami on the island of American Samoa; Samoan police carry the body of a tsunami victim found in the waters near Matavai on the southern coast of Western Samoa; a member of the Queensland Ambulance Service searches among debris for tsunami victims in the village of Saleapaga on Samoa's southern coast; villagers watch as rescue workers search for victims among the debris.



The minister's wife saw the wave coming. She was cooking. She yelled to my aunty to start running. They panicked. Aunty grabbed the kids and ran up the hill. Aunty thought her daughter was ahead and already safe, but after the wave had passed, they came across her body, all cut up, down in the debris."

For Ameto Tovia and thousands like him who have moved to Australia and New Zealand in search of work opportunities and a better education for their children, Samoa will always be home. But it is when a crisis hits that the ache of not being there to help family members in need is greatest. Tovia's aunt, Matalena Fifo, lives in the village of Lalomanu, one of the worst affected by the tsunami that hit the Samoan island of Upolu on September 30, 2009, following a powerful earthquake offshore. Her daughter was 14 years old.

"She is devastated, but what can you do? I don't know how you cope with it," Tovia says, the hurt evident in his voice.

About 50,000 Samoan-born people live in New Zealand and about 15,000 in Australia. Families living offshore are relied on to support those who stay on in Samoa and it is a source of great pride for them to be able to do so.

Tovia, who lives in Sydney, is the eldest of nine brothers and sisters. Three of his sisters live in Sydney and Melbourne, one brother lives in Auckland and the remaining siblings live in Samoa. Fortunately, of those living in Samoa, three brothers live in Falealupo, a small village at the tip of the island of Savai'i untouched by the tsunami, and a sister lives in the capital, Apia.

As the eldest son, Tovia has a responsibility to make sure the family in Samoa is looked after financially and to work with the other members of the

family to manage land rights and chief titles. "I am organising my brothers to get a working bee together to go and help my aunty rebuild the house. My brother can get four or five boys together to go for a week to help out," he says.

With most families in Samoa having little or no money in reserve, funds are needed for things as simple as the ferry and bus fares to get the crew from one island to the ruined village on the other. Not to mention the building supplies required.

"Even a bag of cement costs a lot of money over there," Tovia explains.

Evidence of family support can be seen throughout Samoa. At night, televisions glare from some of the *fales*, the open-sided houses that line either side of the road in the villages. Locals wear T-shirts brought over by relatives with their traditional *lavalavas* (sarongs) and rubber thongs. The children usually wear shoes only to church. ►



FAULT LINES

Sizeable earthquakes have rocked the Pacific region since September 2009, causing death and widespread destruction on the Indonesian island of Sumatra and the violent tsunami that swamped parts of Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga.

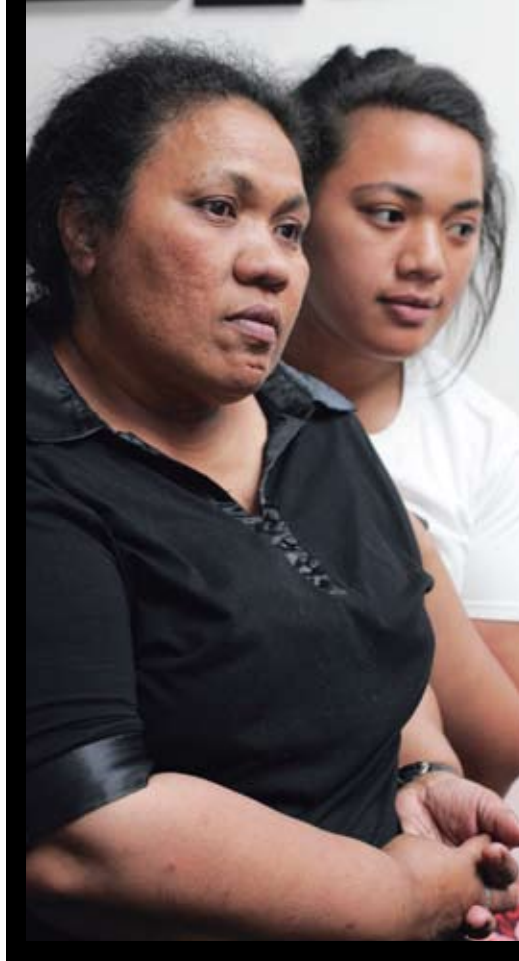
Two major earthquakes within 15 minutes occurred 300km north-west of Vanuatu in October, prompting tsunami warnings in New Zealand, Samoa, northern Australia, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands. Fortunately, no damage eventuated from the quakes and the tsunami warnings were withdrawn within a few hours.

The tsunami warnings did nothing to alleviate the fears of those people who have already faced the trauma that these natural disasters can bring. In Samoa, the streets of the capital Apia and coastal villages were deserted when the tsunami warning sirens sounded as islanders fled inland in panic.

Despite the apparent recent rise in earthquake activity, most experts agree the timing is a coincidence and that there is no connection between the quakes.

The recent earthquakes affecting the Pacific, along with about 90 per cent of all the world's earthquakes, have occurred along the Rim of Fire fault lines, where the world's continental plates move against each other in a 40,000km arc of seismic activity.

The Rim of Fire, which runs from NZ to Samoa, into Indonesia and up the US west coast is named for the 450 volcanoes dotted along it. According to the US Geological Survey, numerous earthquakes occur daily along the Rim of Fire, ranging from mild tremors to the major destructive quakes that rocked Samoa and Indonesia in September.



OF LIFE AND DEATH

Clockwise from left: Juanita Loli and her 15-year-old daughter Etenity at their Bolton Point home after hearing news of family lost in the tsunami in Samoa; Ameto Tovia weaving a basket out of palm leaves; a letter lies in the debris at Coconut Resort in tsunami-destroyed Maninoa Siumu on the southern coast of Western Samoa.

Most of the homes on these hot, humid islands have cement floors and tin roofs held up by wooden pillars, and are open to the afternoon breezes. They are painted in whatever colours are available – usually white with red and blue trim. Families eat together on the floor – adults before children – out of shared bowls of taro and fish cooked in coconut, chicken caught and killed just before dinner or canned corned beef, bananas and breadfruit. A pig is killed and roasted on special occasions. Some families have fridges, some don't. They live day to day here and most families have enough mouths to feed that there are rarely leftovers.

When darkness falls and family meetings and prayers are finished, parents, children and whatever cousins, friends, uncles and aunties happen to be over for a chat, simply find a spot on the woven mats lining the floor to lie down, rest their heads on their arms and fall asleep.

Families work tending the land – tropical fruit, taro and other vegetables thrive in the rich, volcanic soil in the lush forest that backs onto most of the homes – and some work in the hotels, markets or for the government, but unemployment is widespread. Money from relatives living offshore is essential for buying basic

supplies, such as sugar and flour, and to pay for house upkeep, weddings, funerals, school fees and church donations.

Religion plays as big a role on the island as it does for most Samoans living offshore. Much of the Samoan culture and language has survived the influences of the outside world and even those who leave the island take a big slice of the Samoan way of life with them. In the suburbs of Australian or New Zealand cities, the same sumptuous feasts are still laid out after church each Sunday for extended family, they continue to converse in Samoan and family photos of relatives back home are decorated with floral *leis* in living rooms.

Samuga Vili, spokesman for the Tsunami Response Group in Christchurch, says he is afraid many Samoans living outside of Samoa will risk burying themselves in debt to help their families in need. "Their responsibility is quite huge for back home," Vili says. "I know people who, when there's a disaster like this, will just give what they've got and forget about their responsibilities over here. I have a fear they will not be able to pay for food, rent and bills. They will just give, give, give."

Juanita Loli, a Samoan welfare worker for Newcastle's Northern Settlement Services in Australia, has been lending extra

support to the Samoan community living in the Hunter Valley since the tsunami. But having lost 15 family members herself, she says she is getting as much comfort as she is giving others.

"We are all comforting each other, it's brought everyone together," Loli says. "Everyone's distressed about it, we talk a lot about it and we rely on our beliefs in God, that's all we can do."

The emotional and financial support Loli will be giving her family in Samoa is being echoed across the Pacific. "Family is very important to us, everyone will be helping their own families over there," she says.

ISLAND LIFE

Samoa is made up of two main islands, Savai'i and Opolu. About 40 villages were devastated by the tsunami along a stretch of about 40km on Opolu's south-east coast. The wave, which was reported to be at least 7m high, wiped out everything in its path as it stormed almost 200m inland.

The islanders were peacefully going about their business when disaster struck and changed their lives forever.

Loli is from the village of Malaela. Her sister was cleaning up the yard when the wave came. "They live on the beach and right after the earthquake they saw the water had sucked right out, then they heard a growling, roaring noise; they all came out of their houses to see what was happening. "All of a sudden they saw a big wave heading their way and ran, but they had nowhere to run. They tried to make it up the mountain but they said it was so fast," says Loli.

When Loli heard about the wave she tried to call her sister but couldn't reach her. She finally managed to contact her niece who said her mother was missing. "If I didn't have a strong heart I would have died. I was scared. I didn't sleep for two nights while they were looking for my sister, I was just praying someone would find her," says Loli.

A relative did find her sister. The wave had picked her up and thrown her into a tree. She was unconscious and badly injured when she was found, but she was alive. When Loli finally heard from her sister, three days after the wave hit, she says there are no words to describe the relief she felt.

"My sister Amy called out my name [on the phone] and I called out hers and we just

both cried ... I was just so happy that I could hear her, I thought she had died."

But grief soon set in and they mourned for the cousins, their cousins' children and grandchildren who had all lost their lives in the disaster. Her sister's grandson, 3-year-old Joseph, was missing for several more days before he too was found dead under some car tyres and rubble in the bush.

One of the hardest things for the villagers to cope with was not being able to hold proper burials for their loved ones. Traditionally, family members who perish are buried on family land, often outside the front of the house, and funerals last a week to allow people time to say goodbye and adjust to a death. Friends and neighbours come to pay their respects and leave gifts of food and finely woven mats. "That's why a lot of us are devastated, funerals are very important to us," Loli says. "It's tearing people apart."

With the village destroyed and the heat causing bodies to decompose quickly, the islanders had no choice but to bury the dead as soon as they were found. "There is no time to mourn and get over what's happened; people are psychologically tormented."

Loli was planning to fly over with medical supplies to help treat injured people camped out on the hillside above the disaster-struck area. Although those hospitalised with severe injuries were being treated, others with cuts and other injuries also needed help. She said there were still dead animals and washed-up sealife lying about and that a disease outbreak was likely.

Loli also planned to discuss with her sister where to rebuild. Most want to settle further inland now. By Christmas much of the area will have been cleaned up and many of the houses will have been rebuilt. But will they celebrate Christmas?

"In the villages that are untouched, maybe, but where I come from I really don't think there will be any Christmas [celebrations]."

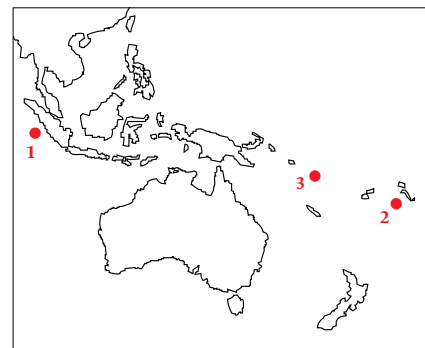
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Read about the United Nations' call for the Pacific nations to reduce their exposure to future disasters through infrastructure.



MAJOR 2009 PACIFIC RIM EARTHQUAKES

1

Closest country: Indonesia.
Magnitude: 7.6 (September 30) and 7 (October 1).
Casualties: 1100.
Worst hit: West Sumatran city of Padang and nearby towns.
Destruction: Homes, hotels, shopping centres, roads and office blocks.

2

Closest countries: Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga.
Magnitude: 8.3 (September 30) and tsunami.
Casualties: 200.
Worst hit: 40km stretch of coast on island of Upolu in Samoa.
Destruction: Homes, hotels, plantations, cars – everything in the tsunami's path.

3

Closest country: Vanuatu.
Magnitude: 7.4 (October 8) and 7.9 (October 8).
Casualties: None reported.
Destruction: No damage was reported.

To see the earthquakes that have occurred in your area over the past 30 days, visit Geoscience Australia ga.gov.au/earthquakes

HOW TO HELP

Oxfam New Zealand is receiving donations to help provide water, food and shelter for the devastated communities. Visit oxfam.org.nz to donate. Red Cross Australia is helping rehabilitate the properties, businesses and resorts that provided a livelihood for many. Visit redcross.org.au to donate, or phone 1800 811 700.