

Beat: Travel

Strong earthquake hits Pacific Ocean near Tonga, no tsunami alert

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USPA News - A strong and shallow earthquake struck off the Pacific island nation of Tonga on early Tuesday afternoon, seismologists and local officials said, but there were no immediate reports of damage or casualties. No tsunami warnings were issued.

The 5.9-magnitude earthquake at 2:29 p.m. local time (0129 GMT) on Tuesday was centered about 72 kilometers (44.7 miles) northeast of Niuafuou, the most northerly island in the kingdom. It struck about 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) deep, making it a shallow earthquake, according to the United States Geological Survey (USGS). There were no immediate reports of damage or casualties after Tuesday's quake, which also struck some 159 kilometers (99 miles) west-northwest of Hihifo, the main village on the island of Niuatoputapu. USGS computer models showed no damage was to be expected but indicated several thousand people on islands near the epicenter may have felt very light shaking. Because earthquakes with a magnitude below 7 are unlikely to generate tsunamis, no tsunami alerts were issued. "No destructive widespread tsunami threat exists based on historical and tsunami data," the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center said in a bulletin, which initially noted the small chance of a local tsunami after putting the preliminary magnitude at 6.5. Tonga is on the so-called 'Pacific Ring of Fire', an arc of fault lines circling the Pacific Basin that is prone to frequent and large earthquakes. Volcanic eruptions also occur frequently in the region, which is one of the most geologically active parts in the world. Tonga, with a total population of around 104,000 people, is made up of 169 islands sprinkled over the Pacific Ocean about one-third of the way from New Zealand to Hawaii. Only thirty-nine of the islands are inhabited, but many of its residents live in structures that are vulnerable to earthquakes. On September 29, 2009, an 8.1-magnitude earthquake struck 185 kilometers (115 miles) east-northeast of Hihifo on Tonga, unleashing large tsunamis that killed nearly 200 people and injured hundreds more in Tonga, American Samoa, Samoa, and other nearby island nations.

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