Tidal surges cause massive damage in FSM

By Online Editor
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In early December a low pressure system 5,000 miles wide developed in the northwestern Pacific Ocean. At the same time the moon's orbit was approaching its closest distance to the earth (perigee).

The combination of the two events caused a massive tidal swell to sweep southwest across the Pacific.

It attracted Kelly Slater, the world famous surfer, to Pohnpei for a gymnastic romp on the resulting monster waves at Palikir Pass in Pohnpei. He and other surfers had been watching the system develop for at least a week.

Meanwhile, the swell that brought surfers the ride of a lifetime hammered atoll islands across the Pacific with devastatingly high tides. There have been reports of widespread flooding from the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Bougainville and Papua New Guinea.

And the Federated States of Micronesia.

Pohnpei saw high wave action on its northwestern shores but no flooding because of the protection offered by its distant barrier reef. The state of Kosrae was not so lucky. There, homes on the northwest shore were flooded and there were reports of serious shoreline erosion.

Reports of flooding in Yap's outer islands were received by Yap Government officials as soon as the waves began to hit on December 8. Within two days of the flooding, detailed preliminary reports had already been compiled by the state government on Yap Island in preparation for its emergency response efforts.

Aloysius Yagupeirog reported that on the northeast side of Eauripik, an outer island of Yap, the "first four lines of coconut trees" were uprooted and washed away. Seawalls built as a U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency project in response to a previous typhoon in Yap were destroyed along with all of the piers on that shore. Half of the foundation of the traditional men's house on the northern shore was also washed away during the tidal surge.

Damage reports from 13 of Yap's outer islands reported similar types of damage. All of the reports said that island residents were safe and that there had been no injuries.

In Pohnpei state reporting went at a slow and perhaps even at a dangerous pace. Dais Lorrin of Pohnpei's Office of Emergency Assistance said that he received no report of the flooding in Pohnpei's outer islands until Dec. 17 when he was called to a meeting in the office Pohnpei Lt. Governor Churchill Edward, nine days after the flooding began. Two days later he had received no information of any flooding that might have occurred on Pakin, Pingelap, Sapuafik, or Mwokil.

Lorrin said that in the outer islands, due to limited power supply, no one monitors the High Frequency Single Side Band radio that is used to communicate with Pohnpei. He said that each of the outer islands has a representative who lives in Pohnpei whose job it is to monitor a radio in case there is a call from their home island. When there is an emergency in the outer islands it is that person's responsibility to notify the Office of Emergency Assistance so that they can begin to develop an emergency response. Lorrin said that the representatives never contacted his office.

Lorrin said that the signal from Pohnpei state radio station V6AH has not been able to reach the outer islands for at least four months. "The whole reason we have a radio station is for emergency communications," said Lorrin.

An employee at V6AH confirmed that because of equipment failures at the radio station the signal isn't even reaching the opposite side of the island of Pohnpei just a few miles away. The employee also verified Lorrin's contention that the telephone hybrid at the station has been out of order for nearly a year. The telephone hybrid allows the radio station to rebroadcast live emergency announcements from a telephone, calls such as Lorrin would make from a command center during a disaster.

Brand new telephone hybrids can be obtained for as little as US$300. Right now, the only way that the Office of Emergency Assistance can communicate with the outer islands is to wait until residents call their representatives in Pohnpei by single side band radio.

"The people need to know that there is a serious communication problem," Lorrin told Pacific Magazine with a red face. "This should not happen!"

Solomon Lowson, the chief of Kapingamarangi, an atoll island system nearly 455 miles south of Pohnpei with a fluctuating population of 300 to 400 people, said that in the 52 years of his life the island has flooded four times but that December's flooding was the worst he's ever seen.

Sea walls were breached. The main taro patches and others were flooded. The concrete connecting bridge between islands collapsed at its center point.

Many of the thatched roofed, open sided homes built on stilts in Kapingamarangi collapsed during the flooding, Lowson said.

Lowson said that the atoll's school was closed for four days, not because of water damage to the school but because of the "horrible smell" of the decaying carcasses of sea slugs that washed onto shore during the flooding.

Probably the most devastating result of the Pacific tidal swell in early December is the saltwater damage done to the Pacific Island food staple, taro. Yap's outer islands all reported flooding of their taro patches. Pohnpei outer island leaders say their islands are faced with the same problem.

Taro in patches that were flooded with sea water will likely die. Because of seepage of sea water through the ground even taro in patches that did not flood may also die even on islands that didn't receive the heavy flooding that Kapingamarangi reported.

Lowson said that most of the taro has turned yellow and brown in Kapingamarangi. He estimated that 90 percent of the taro was lost during the flooding there. He said that his people will need assistance with their food supply.

Though food is exported from Pohnpei to Kapingamarangi every three months or so, the people there generally subsist on fish, coconut, and taro.

The FSM's field trip ship, 'The Caroline Voyager,' did go to Kapingamarangi in November but it was a charter scheduled by the European Union that brought only solar powered electrical system, not food. Lowson said that he was told that the organizers did not want to risk damaging the expensive equipment and would not allow other freight on board the ship. He said that the last time the ship went to the island with food was over three months prior to the EU's November trip.

The government of Kapingamarangi has declared a state of emergency and is seeking assistance to repair the damage caused by the ocean's surge.

Jeff Ladouce of the FSM weather service station located in Pohnpei said that he had received second-hand information that at the height of the tidal surge, the atoll islands of Nukuoro were under two feet of water. Dais Lorrin said that he had only been able to verify that one of the northern uninhabited islands experienced some flooding.

Lorrin said that a draft declaration of the state of emergency in Pohnpei's outer islands is on Governor John Ehsa's desk. When signed, the declaration will be sent on to the office of FSM President Manny Mori, along with a request to use the Caroline Voyager to send food relief and other supplies to the outer islands. He said that a voyage to the southern islands would also be used for damage assessment of the islands.

When flooding began on Dec. 8, the Caroline Voyager was in Chuuk carrying solar electric power systems to the islands there. Lorrin said that if the emergency had been reported to his office at that time the trip to the outer islands might by now already have been completed. Instead the ship didn't arrive in Pohnpei until December 19 and few preparations for the possible trip to the outer islands have been completed.

Andrew Yatilman, who is in charge of the FSM government's Office of Environmental and Emergency Management, said that a damage assessment team had already been to Yap and that one was on its way to Kosrae. He said his office would likely have a damage report by the end of December.

SOURCE: P/MAGAZINE/PACNEWS