Beat: Travel

Moderate quake near Tonga briefly prompts tsunami alert

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USPA News - A moderate earthquake struck near the Pacific island nation of Tonga on early Friday morning, briefly prompting a tsunami alert for the nearby nation of Samoa, seismologists and local officials said, but no there were no reports of damage or casualties. The 5.8-magnitude earthquake at 8:01 a.m. local time on Friday was centered about 80 kilometers (50 miles) north-northeast of Hihifo, the main village on the island of Niuatoputapu in Tonga.

It struck about 17 kilometers (10.6 miles) deep, making it a shallow earthquake, according to the United States Geological Survey (USGS). Seismologists in the nearby island nation of Samoa initially registered the earthquake as 6.7 on the Richter scale, prompting authorities to issue a tsunami watch and urging residents to prepare for possible evacuations. "All people living on low-lying coastal areas are advised to take precaution and standby for further updates," the Samoa Meteorological Service said in a bulletin. The tsunami watch was canceled soon after when the earthquake`s magnitude was significantly downgraded and no tsunami waves were observed. The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center did not issue a watch or warning after the tremor because earthquakes with a magnitude below 7 are unlikely to generate tsunamis. There were no immediate reports of damage or casualties from the earthquake itself, which was not felt on Samoa but may have been observed on Tonga. USGS computer models estimated that approximately 2,000 people on nearby islands may have felt `light` shaking while up to 193,000 others may have noticed `weak` tremors, but neither would have caused damage. The island nations of Tonga and Samoa are both 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 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. Samoa, situated next to neighboring American Samoa, is roughly 300 kilometers (186 miles) from Hihifo. On September 29, 2009, a major 8.1-magnitude earthquake struck 185 kilometers (115 miles) east-northeast of Hihifo on Tonga, unleashing large tsunami waves that killed nearly 200 people and injured hundreds more in Tonga, American Samoa, Samoa, and other nearby islands.

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