

Tsunami destruction raises fears of disease, hunger

SYDNEY, Australia – The earthquake and tsunami that struck the Solomon Islands have made many fearful of widespread disease and hunger among the coastal communities sheltered on high ground.

Fresh-water tanks have spoiled, increasing the risk of water-borne diseases that could spread among the thousands of people who lost their homes in the April 2 tsunami. The Associated Press reported April 4 that aid workers already had reported cases of diarrhea, which they said could be a sign of more diseases to come.

A series of violent aftershocks continued to rock the region after the tsunami, which was triggered by a magnitude 8.1 underwater earthquake. At least 28 people were killed in the natural disasters.

The airport in the town of Gizo was not expected to reopen until April 9.

However, international aid organizations mobilized medicine, food, shelter, water cans and bottled water to be sent to Gizo. Caritas Australia launched an appeal for funds to assist the humanitarian crisis and reconstruction work. Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' international relief and development agency, said in an April 2 statement that it would commit an initial \$100,000 for emergency relief.

Sisters at the Dominican novitiate on Loga Island were at breakfast when the long, heavy earthquake struck, violently shaking the convent.

"They rushed outside, saw the sea retreat, remembered a tsunami could follow and ran up the hill," said Dominican Sister Rose Mary Kinne of Sydney. "They were there when the wave of water hit, high enough to flood the sisters' house and novitiate."

The priest's house and chapel also were flooded, and the nearby village of Nusubruku had "fallen down," said Sister Rose Mary.

Local men journeying by canoe described the sea as “alive with struggling animals – dogs, pigs swept far offshore,” she told Catholic News Service.

Part of the bell tower and one wall collapsed at St. Peter the Apostle Cathedral in Gizo. The home of Bishop Bernard O’Grady of Gizo also was damaged in the quake, but the bishop said he expected to move back after broken glass and furnishings were cleaned up.

Bishop O’Grady was among those who spent the night of the tsunami sleeping outside in the surrounding hills.

“We were blessed in having a beautiful moonlit night and no rain,” he said.

The bishop said an inspection of the township April 3 revealed some houses “still in good shape” while all the locally made homes had collapsed. He praised the Chinese community of Gizo for “freely feeding the people with what they have in their stores.”

The task ahead, he said, was to find out the fate of people living in the fishing villages on the outskirts of Gizo township.