

Notes from the Field

by Jo Laurence

You've seen the post card—waving palm trees, lush greenery, clear blue water, and colourful tropical fish that come right up to meet you. This was Niue to a T, until it was struck by Tropical Cyclone Heta in January 2004.

Cutting a destructive arc through the Pacific from January 4th to 7th, TC Heta caused damage to Samoa, American Samoa, Tonga, and Tokelau, but in Niue it was regarded as the worst cyclone in living memory.

At first when I heard this phrase I was sceptical. The worst 'anything' in living memory makes a great headline for the media. Also the emotional impact of a past destructive event often begins to fade with time. But when I arrived on the island it was clear this was no exaggeration. I didn't need to hear the stories of the local islanders' experiences, all I had to do was look around.

Everywhere around the capital of Alofi buildings were crushed and debris was scattered about. Some buildings seemed to have been just sucked up off the ground and washed away, all that remained was the foundations. One man I spoke to said the waves were like the tentacles of a giant octopus that just wrapped around the houses and pulled them back into the sea.

Around 200 homes were lost, many businesses and significantly, the hospital was completely demolished. There were two deaths and numbers of people with injuries including broken bones. The people of Niue were in dire straits.

200 homes might not sound like much, but Niue is the smallest independent country in the world,



and has a tiny population of 1400. All communications around and outside the island were cut, fuel tanks were damaged and fuel was low, crops were destroyed, people homeless, asbestos roofing was broken up and scattered around, and without a hospital, there was no way to provide basic health care or care for those injured in the cyclone.

Though Niue's own people began clean up and repairs immediately, it was clear that this level of devastation would be more than they could cope with by themselves. Australia, New Zealand, France and

the Cook Islands were all keen to assist. As Niue is a New Zealand protectorate, New Zealand took the lead, but Australia was requested to provide medical assistance. (Niue also has strong ties to Australia, with a population of Niueans living in Australia that is many times larger than that at home.)

The day after a request was received, an Australian Defence Force (ADF) C130 Hercules was on its way with an army medical team consisting of 17 medical and support personnel, and myself. As an Emergency Management Australia Liaison Officer with year round responsibility for providing support to the Disaster Management Offices in the Pacific Islands, I accompanied the Australian medical team to Niue. My role was to assist with the initial integration and set up of the service and to provide much needed communication for the Australian Government, as local and international communication systems were still unavailable.

The medical team was very gratefully received on the island and did much to boost the morale of the people. Apart from the service provided, it was a symbol of the fact that people in the outside world cared about what was happening there. The clinic was set up in record time and the level of care, professionalism and willingness of the staff to be of help impressed both the local Niueans and the international visitors who were helping with the relief effort. By the second day, a mobile health unit was making its way around the villages, ensuring that everyone had the care they needed and providing medication and advice on the smaller ailments, like colds

and abrasions, that many people were suffering.

Much as the ADF were impressive, so were many of the local responders. Everywhere people were working to clear debris and rebuild damaged houses. With the assistance of Australia, New Zealand, France, the Cook Islands and a number of NGOs (notably the New Zealand Red Cross), a range of relief assistance has now been provided and the Niuean Government, with the help of New Zealand has embarked on the recovery and reconstruction phase. The effects of TC Heta will be felt



for many years to come though, particularly through the loss of the reefs which were almost completely swept away by the storm. The reefs were the main tourist attraction, bringing divers to the island.

When I first went to Niue I was impressed by the beauty of its scenery, the tropical fish, the corals, the whales. Though the greenery is now brown from salt spray, the palm trees are down, the fish and corals gone in most places, I am confident in the resilience of Niue's people. They have also impressed me, not only by their warmth and friendliness, but also by the courage with which they are rebuilding. They have already restored much of their infrastructure and I am sure that, given time and some assistance from their neighbours, Niue will again be a quiet paradise.

STORY

words words words words

Let us help you put your story into words

The Australian Journal of Emergency Management editorial advisory committee aims to ensure the Journal remains relevant to all individuals.

To further develop the emergency management body of knowledge in Australia EMA encourages contributions in AJEM from all areas of emergency management not just academics or researchers. There is a wealth of knowledge that could be shared with readers of AJEM, however there may be some reluctance to commit to paper because of a lack of time or uncertainty about writing skills. AJEM has therefore made it easier for all to contribute their stories and/or comments.

AJEM now has a team of professional writers to help develop your story. They will amend drafts or simply interview you over the phone and write an article that may be published in the Journal.

Readership survey thank you

EMA recently conducted a readership survey amongst readers of the Australian Journal of Emergency Management.

We are pleased to announce that we received an unprecedented response to the survey with 30 per cent return of useable responses.

Thank you to all of the readers who responded so promptly to our survey.

We will publish a summary of the responses in a future edition of AJEM.