

Survivor Tokelau?

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In February this year, the tiny island of Tokelau experienced a devastating cyclone. Joanne Laurence led a United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination team to assess damage. She provides an insight into the experience.

Can you picture a place more vulnerable than three tiny specks in the ocean, no more than two meters above sea level and in places less than 90 meters wide? This is the tiny country of Tokelau. Administered by New Zealand but moving toward increased levels of self government, it has a unique, warm and vibrant culture, considered to be the most traditional Polynesian community in the Pacific.

Unfortunately it is also in the cyclone belt and on 26 February 2005, the island was struck hard by *Tropical Cyclone Percy*, causing widespread damage and cutting off communications to some islands for more than a week.

In response to a request from Tokelau's Government I led a United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team to complete an independent assessment of the cyclone damage. Working together with Samoan Red Cross representatives, a marine ecosystem specialist from the South Pacific Regional Environment Program, and a remarkable group of dedicated individuals from the Government and community of Tokelau, we spent a week on Tokelau's three atolls.

Our first challenge was to get there, as Tokelau is one of the most remote communities in the world. After flying to Samoa, our team camped out on a cargo barge, which

was the only form of transport to the islands. Following a difficult 36 hours on a flat-bottomed boat in open ocean (in the wake of a cyclone), we gratefully reached the first atoll and were conducted on foot around the inhabited islands and to particularly devastated areas.

No cars, no TV, no guns, no hot water, 36C and 90 per cent humidity by 7am, inhabited by dengue-fever bearing mosquitos and biting ants. One of our guides soon dubbed our trip as "Survivor Tokelau".

It soon became clear that the cyclone had caused extensive damage. Though there was some impact to homes, public buildings were the worst hit. Hospitals and



Extensive damage occurred to plants and seawalls around the islands.



Beach erosion exposed house foundations and moved water tanks on Nukunonu.

schools already getting by with minimal equipment had lost much of what they had, and in many places the remainder was water damaged and likely to corrode or rot. Food and other supplies in warehouses were washed out to sea and much of the staple food crops were destroyed and will take years to recover. With the addition of damage to the marine environment, food source security has been considerably undermined.

Village Councils, an important level of government, showed great concern at the vulnerability of their communities in the discussions we

conducted as we travelled around. Their concern over the loss of the sea walls around much of the coast is heightened as it was these very walls they credit with having saved them and their property from being swept away.

The people of Tokelau are remarkably self-motivated and much is already being done to address these concerns. A lot of hard work has gone into marshalling their own resources and several donors are assisting them to promote the recovery process. The damage assessment report compiled by the UNDAC

team has been taken up by several agencies and under the direction of the Tokelauan administration is being used to guide the reconstruction process.