

Beat: Travel

Magnitude-6.2 quake hits Pacific Ocean off Tonga, no tsunami alert

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USPA News - A strong and shallow earthquake struck off the Pacific island nation of Tonga on late Saturday, with strong shaking felt in the kingdom's capital, seismologists and witnesses said. No tsunami alerts were issued and there were no reports of serious damage.

The 6.2-magnitude earthquake at 7:02 p.m. local time (0602 GMT) on Saturday was centered in waters about 67 kilometers (42 miles) northeast of Nuku'alofa, the kingdom's capital, on the island of Tongatapu. It struck about 39.4 kilometers (24.5 miles) deep, making it a shallow earthquake, according to the United States Geological Survey (USGS). Strong shaking lasting less than a minute could be felt in Nuku'alofa and other nearby places, but there were no immediate reports of damage or casualties. USGS computer models showed at least 90,000 people living near the epicenter may have felt "light" to "moderate" shaking, but said serious damage was not expected. No tsunami alerts were issued after the earthquake, which was initially measured at magnitude 6.5. Tonga is 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 total 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, but many of its residents live in structures that are vulnerable to earthquakes. On September 29, 2009, an 8.1-magnitude earthquake struck 185 kilometers (115 miles) east-northeast of Hihifo on Tonga, unleashing large tsunamis that killed nearly 200 people and injured hundreds more in Tonga, American Samoa, Samoa, and other nearby island nations.

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UPA United Press Agency LTD
483 Green Lanes
UK, London N13NV 4BS
contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
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