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WIND, WATER WREAK HAVOC IN MARSHALL ISLANDS

Submitted by admin on Wed, 01/24/2001 - 00:00

MAJURO, Marshall Islands (January 19, 2001 – The Marshall Islands Journal)---A high tide propelled by strong currents and winds gusting to 40 knots flooded parts of Majuro Saturday night, forcing some families to seek refuge in the second story High Court, museum buildings and local schools.

Several Majuro elementary schools remained closed Monday as displaced families were staying in classrooms.

The confluence of unexpectedly rough seas, a high tide and high winds caused low parts of this already low-lying coral atoll to be flooded for about three hours late Saturday evening.

"We had no warning," said Chief Secretary Phillip Kabua Monday. As the waves began rolling in Saturday evening, Guam weather officials were contacted, but they said according to their forecasts, there were no high surf advisories or anything out of the ordinary.

Kabua and several other local residents noted that a strong current that ebbs and flows between Arno and Majuro was apparently out in force around Majuro Saturday, accounting for the sudden surge of waves.

Several stores in the downtown area of the capital barricaded their front doors to prevent the one-foot deep water from washing in.

There were no serious injuries reported from the flood, said hospital administrator Sandy Alfred.

Hardest hit by waves were the Oceanside areas on the eastern end of the atoll from Rita to Delap. The road by the airport runway was also littered with rocks and rubbish that were tossed up by the waves.

Down in the MIC area of Uliga, one homeowner reported a freak wave breaking over a seawall that lifted a car up like a ping-pong ball and smashed it into a wall, breaking its rear window. Another Uliga resident reported that at his Oceanside home, the flood waters came up to the bottom edge of the windows of his concrete house before subsiding -- thankfully, he didn't have a doorway facing the ocean, so only a little water washed into his house.

Emergency crews from Public Works and the local government with bulldozers and other heavy equipment responded quickly to clear the roads and housing areas that were littered with coral, rocks and debris washed in from the ocean. They worked late into the night Saturday.

January and February historically produce the highest tides of the year in the Marshall Islands and it is not uncommon for minor flooding to occur once or twice during these periods.

Saturday night's flood, however, was the worst seen since the early 1990s.

Emergency Report Filed

RMI officials filed a preliminary report with the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Sunday night concerning the waves that hit Majuro on Saturday.

Chief Secretary Phillip Kabua said FEMA was alerted, and told that more details of the damage would be forthcoming. He said Monday he expected to send a fuller report to FEMA later this week, although he added that the RMI didn't know if the level of damage sustained in Majuro would meet FEMA conditions for eligibility.

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