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CNS/Reuters

An injured woman who survived a tidal wave is helped from a plane in Vanimo in northwest Papua New Guinea July 19. An Australian Franciscan order, with members working in the region hit by the wave, feared more than 2,000 people dead in villages on the island's northwest coast.

## Thousands feared dead after tidal waves strike

PERTH, Australia (CNS) — The rescue effort following three tidal waves in northern Papua New Guinea was slowing down, a church official said.

"The first two days we were scrambling to get choppers in — we could see they were dying," Franciscan Father Augustine Crapp, diocesan administrator of Aitape, Papua New Guinea, said on Australian national television July 20.

He said the survivors he had spoken to as he toured devastated villages were happy to see him but also distressed and stunned by their experiences, with some crying on his shoulder.

"They were sort of spaced out and traumatized completely," he said.

In the days after the wave, people everywhere were picking through the debris of their wrecked villages and looking for relatives, he said. Everywhere there were people who had lost most of or their entire families. Meanwhile, health was a major worry.

"We're getting worried now. In the village I walked through yesterday, the stench was incredible. We're worried that malaria and other (diseases) will set in," he said.

Father Crapp said he was on top of a mountain overlooking the ocean in the northern coastal town of Aitape when the earthquake that caused the waves hit the evening of July 17. He said he realized it was a big quake and went outside to see what had happened.

He said there was nothing but silence for about 10 minutes or so.

"Then we heard a tremendous roar as the wave hit the beach, then the sound of wrenching, then later people screaming," he said.

The villages devastated by the waves were predominantly populated by fishermen. The estimated death toll continued to mount as troops and police moved throughout the area burying victims where they had died — often on the beach or close inshore.

Although the official death toll stood at just more than 700 on the evening of July 20, the provincial governor of Aitape estimated the number of dead would exceed

2,000 or 3,000.

Father Crapp said he hoped it was not that high but feared it could reach that number.

"I do hope 2,000 is not correct, but I'm afraid it might be," he said.

Earlier, a clearly emotional Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Bill Skate spoke to Australian journalists after having toured the devastated area, saying he would never be able to forget what he had seen.

Skate canceled the national celebrations planned to mark the first anniversary of his party coming to power in Papua New Guinea.

Australian missionaries working in the area said the tidal waves caused devastation "much worse than at first reckoned."

Australian Franciscan officials said that in the wake of the tidal wave, the lagoon in Sissano, Papua New Guinea, was full of bodies and debris from trees, houses and household goods. The mouth of the canal into the lagoon was choked with bodies, making canoe access impossible.

Entire villages were wiped out, and survivors were hiding in the jungle far from the sea after fleeing in terror of another wave, said a July 20 statement issued by the Australian Franciscan provincial office in Sydney.

A large number of the dead were children too small to outrun the waves.

"Many children have disappeared. There are a lot of injured adults coming into the hospital, but no children," a priest in Aitape told Reuters, the British news agency.

In a telegram to Archbishop Hans Schwemmer, apostolic nuncio in Papua New Guinea, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican secretary of state, said Pope John Paul II offered his condolences to the families of the victims of the tragedy.

"Profoundly saddened by the news of the tragic consequences of the tidal wave which has struck the Sandaun province, the Holy Father offers fervent prayers for the victims and invokes divine consolation upon those who mourn and those who are suffering," the message said. The pope urged the international community to aid victims.