Beat: News

UPDATE 1 -- Strong earthquake strikes New Zealand, causing damage

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USPA News - A strong earthquake struck central New Zealand on Friday afternoon, damaging a number of houses and sending tremors as far north as Auckland and as far south as Christchurch, authorities and seismologists said. There were no reports of injuries.

The 6.2-magnitude earthquake at 2:31 p.m. local time (0231 GMT) was centered about 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) southeast of Seddon, a small town near the coast in the Marlborough region of the South Island. It struck about 8 kilometers (4.9 miles) deep, making it a shallow earthquake, according to the Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences (GeoNet), the country`s seismological agency. GeoNet initially measured the strength of the earthquake at 6.9 on the Richter scale, but it was later revised down to 6.2 after seismologists were able to review the data in more detail. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) measured the quake at 6.5 on the moment magnitude scale. Witnesses said strong tremors were felt in the capital Wellington, which is located across the Cook Strait near the coast on the North Island. The most serious tremors were likely felt in the area near the town of Blenheim, but witnesses reported feeling the quake as far north as Auckland and as far south as Christchurch. USGS computer models estimated approximately 1,000 people close to the epicenter may have felt `severe` shaking, while 41,000 others could have felt `strong` to `very strong` shaking. An estimated 1.4 million people further away from the epicenter may have perceived `weak` to `moderate` shaking. No tsunami watches or warnings were issued after the earthquake, although the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center briefly cautioned that a local tsunami could not be ruled out. New Zealand`s Ministry of Civil Defense and Emergency Management later confirmed no tsunami had been generated. As of 4 p.m. local time, the area near Seddon had been rattled by nearly 30 aftershocks, including eight tremors that measured 5.0 or higher on the Richter scale. The strongest aftershock was a magnitude-5.7 tremor that struck 25 kilometers (15.5 miles) southeast of Seddon at 3:51 p.m. The New Zealand Fire Service said it was not aware of any serious damage as of 4 p.m. local time, but said its fire personnel was responding to numerous automatic alarms and a small number of people who were trapped in elevators. It added that a number of power lines were down in the Seddon area. Grant Ogilvie, a spokesman for Wellington District police, said there were a number of incidents involving broken glass in the city but there had been no immediate reports of casualties. "Police are working with the fire service and Wellington City Council staff as assessments take place around the city," he said. Inspector Pete Cowan of Wellington District police urged residents to be patient as they head home early for the weekend. "There is significant traffic on city center roads [with] many people walking home and we ask people to take extra care," he said. "We also ask people to check on any vulnerable neighbors and alert emergency services if they need assistance." Ogilvie said there had been reports of "some damage" to buildings in and around the town of Seddon, which is located in the Marlborough region, as well as in the nearby Tasman Region. "Police have received reports of damage to houses in the Seddon area, but to date there have been no reports of injuries," he added. Police also closed State Highway 1 from Weld Pass to just north of Kaikoura due to a rockfall, but no vehicles were believed to have been hit. "Police advise motorists to take extreme care on the roads, particularly around bridges and overpasses which may have moved," a police spokesperson said. Officials at Wellington International Airport said it was closed for about 20 minutes after the initial earthquake to carry out a full runway and navigational aid inspection, as is standard operating procedure. The airport re-opened at 2:52 p.m. local time, but it was not immediately known how many flights had been affected. Authorities in Kapiti Coast District, which is located north of Wellington, activated its emergency center but said there were no immediate reports of damage from the area. "There are some areas without power on the Kapiti Coast and these areas are currently being worked on by Electra," the district council said in a statement, urging people to check on both their buildings and their neighbors. New Zealand has been struck by several earthquakes during the past few years. A strong 6.3-magnitude earthquake struck near the city of Christchurch on the South Island in June 2011, killing an elderly man after he was knocked unconscious and injuring 46 others, two of them critically. The quake came just months after a 6.3-magnitude earthquake struck near the same city in February 2011, killing 185 people and injuring more than 1,500 others. The earthquake was the country`s deadliest disaster since a powerful 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck the Hawke`s Bay region in February 1931, killing at least 256 people and injuring thousands more.

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