

Operation Ashika Assist

Australian Defence Force members arrived in Tonga early in the morning on Saturday, 8 August 2009, to help recover bodies from the sunken ferry 'Princess Ashika'.

The 16-person clearance diving team, and support personnel, was responding to an official request from the Government of Tonga for Australian assistance in recovery operations.



Navy divers from Clearance Diving Team One are working with counterparts from the Royal New Zealand Navy, in support of the Tongan Defence Service.

The exact location of the ferry is unknown, although a search area has been established.

The Princess Ashika sunk on Wednesday night during a regular weekly service, carrying an estimated 149 people aboard.

A Tongan patrol boat recovered two bodies and 54 survivors, including 28 crew members from the ferry. 93 people remain unaccounted for.

The sinking of Princess Ashika is Tonga's worst ferry disaster since December 1977, when the boat 'Tokomea' disappeared with 63 people on board.