

Castaway survived 16 months adrift at sea by eating turtles

The man washed up on Thursday and said he has been floating in the Pacific since September 2012.

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A MEXICAN MAN who claims to have survived 16 months adrift in the Pacific is today regaining strength on a remote Marshall Islands atoll waiting to be picked up by a Navy ship.

The emaciated castaway, who identified himself as Jose Ivan when he washed up on Ebon Atoll on Thursday, told his rescuers he set sail from Mexico for El Salvador in September 2012 and has been floating on the ocean ever since.

“We’ve been feeding him nutritious island food and he’s getting better,” Ebon Mayor Ione de Brum said in a phone interview from the southernmost cluster of coral islands in the Marshalls.

He has pain in both knees so he cannot stand up by himself. Otherwise, he’s OK.

The man, with long hair and beard and dressed only in ragged underpants, was discovered when his 24-foot fibreglass boat with propellerless engines floated onto the reef at Ebon Atoll and he was spotted by two locals.

Ivan said he had a companion who died several months ago, according to Ola Fjeldstad, a Norwegian anthropology student doing research on the atoll who spoke with the man on Friday.

Survival

The castaway indicated to Fjeldstad that he survived by eating turtles, birds and fish and drinking turtle blood when there was no rain.

No fishing gear was on the boat and the man suggested he caught turtles and birds with his bare hands. There was a turtle on the boat when it landed at Ebon.

De Brum said she and Ivan were communicating through drawings, since he cannot speak English and she cannot speak Spanish.

“I’ve gotten to know him through pictures he’s drawing,” she said.

He said he was on his way to El Salvador by boat when it started drifting.

But beyond that details of how and what happened remain sketchy.

“It’s been difficult trying to communicate with him,” she added.

Despite communication challenges, the Ebon Atoll community is doing its best to help him, bringing clothes, food and mosquito coils to ensure he is comfortable, she said.

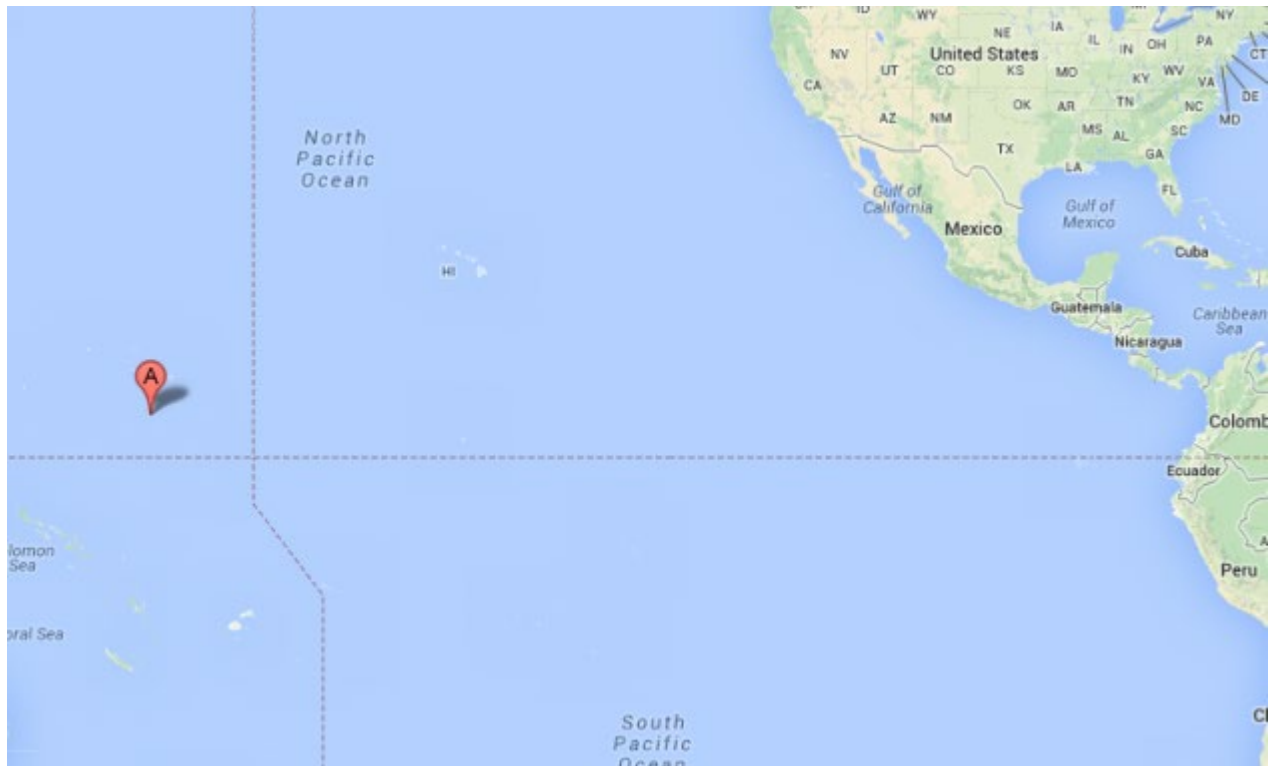
Getting home

Officials with the police department’s Sea Patrol in Majuro said that the agency’s surveillance and rescue patrol vessel left early on Saturday to pick up Ivan and bring him back to the capital.

The vessel was expected to arrive in Ebon Saturday night and depart for Majuro on Sunday.

Acting Secretary of Foreign Affairs Gee Leong Bing said that as soon as Ivan arrives and his particulars can be verified, official contact would be made with Mexican government authorities to begin the repatriation process.

There are virtually no islands in the more than 12,500 kilometre expanse of Pacific Ocean north of the equator between southern Mexico and the Marshall Islands.



The Ebon Atoll in the Marshall Islands (Image: Google Maps)

Had the drifter not washed onto the reef at Ebon, there is another 1,000 or so miles of open ocean before he might have made landfall in Papua New Guinea or the Solomon Islands.

Stories of survival in the vast Pacific are not uncommon.

In 2006, three Mexicans made international headlines when they were discovered drifting, also in a small fibreglass boat near the Marshall Islands, nine months after setting out on a shark-fishing expedition.

They survived on a diet of rainwater, raw fish and seabirds, with their hope kept alive by reading the bible.

Castaways from Kiribati, to the south, frequently find land in the Marshall Islands after ordeals of weeks or months at sea in small boats.