

# Cyclone disrupts ARC chief's rat-killing mission

by Alanah May Eriksen

Auckland Regional Council chairman Mike Lee could have some explaining to do next time he visits the city library, after leaving three of its books on a deserted Pacific island.

Mr Lee was one of 20 evacuated from the low-lying French Polynesian islet of Onetahi as Cyclone Oli struck.

Onetahi is one of the 12 islets of Tetiaroa, an atoll 50km north of Tahiti owned by the late US actor Marlon Brando for about 40 years.

Mr Lee had been working with two Kiwi scientists on a rat eradication programme designed to protect seabirds.

Cyclone Oli struck Tetiaroa on Wednesday night and by yesterday morning, water was lapping at the shipping container in which Mr Lee, Auckland University technician Sandra Anderson and US-based James Russell were staying.

The trio — with the island manager and 16 workers building an airport on the islet — had initially decided to tough it out on Onetahi,

but French authorities decided to send a military helicopter to fly the group back to Tahiti.

Space constraints meant the party were unable to take their baggage, and Mr Lee managed to grab only his cellphone, toothbrush, passport and a pen.

He had to leave behind an autobiography of Winston Churchill, another on Adolf Hitler and a seafaring novel by Patrick O'Brian.

Last night, Mr Lee and his companions were in a motel at the international airport in Papeete, awaiting a flight back to NZ.

He said they had been due to get a boat back to Tahiti from Onetahi today but the cyclone had stopped sea transport.

A keen conservationist who holds a masters degree in biological sciences, Mr Lee took time off from his regular duties with the ARC to join the conservation efforts of Mr Russell, a scientist at the University of California campus in San Francisco.

Mr Lee said the group believed it had managed to trap all the rats — which would hopefully allow the birds to breed in safety.

