

# A pittance in international aid after cyclone devastates Fiji

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Cyclone Ami is the second cyclone to hit the South Pacific in less than a month. After cyclone Zoe, one of the most intense tropical storms on record ripped through the Solomon Islands in late December, Fiji was struck by 200 kph winds that devastated housing, crops and infrastructure on Vanua Levu, the country's second largest island. The aftermath has again highlighted not only the inadequacy of the local relief efforts but also the contemptuous response of the two regional powers, Australia and New Zealand, which have provided the most limited aid.

The cyclone struck Fiji on January 13. The immediate death toll was 14 but many more are still missing so the figure is expected to increase. One extended family lost nine members in the floods. Nilesch Kumar, one of the survivors, said: "It all happened so fast. When we left our home the water was only knee-deep. Suddenly the water rose and within minutes I could feel my feet leaving the ground."

Vanua Levu's major town Labasa was flooded. Radio New Zealand International estimated that tens of thousands of people have no adequate food, clean water or shelter. Floodwaters reached four metres in some areas and communications and power were cut in the affected areas.

People have been forced to drink floodwaters and sewerage water in order to survive. Suren Prasad said: "We have no other choice—we have to drink the water to stay alive. We know it's unsafe but we can't die either can we? We don't have a choice here." The Health Ministry has warned that people are at risk of infectious diseases such as diarrhoea and leptospirosis, but authorities quickly ran out of water purification tablets and had to wait for new supplies from overseas.

Food stocks have been destroyed. Survivors have been forced to rely on limited supplies of undamaged

food. There have been a number of reports of looting in Labasa. Mayor Charan Singh said: "Here we have an emergency. People are starving. There is no food and clean drinking water. How are these people going to survive?" According to an article in the *Fiji Times* on Tuesday, at least 1,000 families are without food because relief distribution has been delayed.

The Fijian government has been overwhelmed by the magnitude of the disaster. Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase had to depend on the New Zealand Air Force to survey the damage. He has declared a state of emergency in the worst affected areas in the northern and eastern parts of the country, but has been unable to supply the resources needed to deal with the emergency.

There have been widespread complaints over the lack of assistance. Seven days after the disaster, the Finance Ministry was still waiting on damage reports from the Disaster Management Committee before distributing relief assistance. The Fiji Red Cross ran out of supplies after helping 20,000 victims and had to rely on donations to continue its relief efforts.

Red Cross Director General Alison Cupit appealed for further aid, saying: "From my first hand experience in Labasa we are adamant that assistance has to be accelerated." Seru Kaumaitotoya, a local official for Qarase's own party, complained that "five days have passed now since cyclone Ami and still there is no sign of help from the government."

The long-term impact is even greater. Vanua Levu is the centre of the country's sugar industry, which has suffered an estimated \$US11 million in damages to the Labasa sugar mill, crops and infrastructure. Some sources say the entire sugar crop has been destroyed. Sugar accounts for 18.5 percent of Fiji's foreign currency earnings and employs 200,000 people, a

quarter of the population. The repair of damaged roads is likely to cost \$4.9 million.

Qarase stated that damage will cost “millions and millions of dollars” to repair but admitted that the government had set aside no funds for the task. “We haven’t got any provision in the budget for 2003,” he said. The Fijian economy is stagnant, with the sugar industry in a state of collapse. The country’s capacity to cope has been further undermined by years of cutbacks to government programs, as part of economic restructuring insisted upon by the IMF along with Australia and New Zealand.

The cyclone has compounded the difficulties facing many sugar farmers. The Qarase government, which appeals to ethnic Fijian chauvinism, has refused to renew the leases of sugar farms, most of which are run by ethnic Indo-Fijians. On the expiry of the leases, farmers have been forced off their land and into substandard housing in shantytowns, which are particularly vulnerable to cyclones.

The Fijian government certainly bears a heavy responsibility for the lack of immediate assistance. But the response of Australian and New Zealand governments, which have the necessary resources to mount a rapid and effective relief operation, reveals a complete indifference towards the plight of Pacific Islanders.

Interviewed on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio on January 16, Australian High Commissioner to Fiji Susan Boyd dismissed the hardships facing the cyclone victims, declaring: “Cyclones have been a common event in the Pacific ... a lot of people in those islands will be able themselves to make good.” The only Australian aid promised was a helicopter for surveillance purposes.

The next day Foreign Minister Alexander Downer announced that Australia would provide the sum of \$US23,700 along with some water purification tablets. An AUSAID statement published on the Internet played down the impact of the cyclone as “less than expected,” even as it stated that the damage had not been “fully assessed”. Another \$US29,600 was given to the Australian High Commission in Fiji for relief work.

The response of New Zealand Foreign Affairs Minister Phil Goff was no better. He promised to allocate \$US11,000, adding only that he would look

“positively” on any further request from Fiji.

Both governments were widely criticised for their failure to respond to the havoc caused by cyclone Zoe in the Solomon Islands. They delayed aid for days while the fate of hundreds of people on the remote islands of Tikopia, Anuta and Fataka in the Solomons and Mota Lava in Vanuatu was unknown.

The first evidence of the devastation caused came from a free-lance journalist who chartered a light aircraft and flew over Tikopia. When an Australian airforce plane did finally fly over the area, it dropped no relief supplies. On the basis of this limited aerial reconnaissance, Australian authorities concluded that there was no risk to life and any relief supplies could be sent by boat.

The first supplies reached Tikopia on January 5, more than a week after the disaster struck. A boat only set out for Anuta on January 7. To date only three boatloads of supplies have reached the islands. Other than a French Air Force helicopter, no contact has been made with the residents of Mota Lava. Missionaries have warned of the danger of epidemics as the island’s inhabitants are still sheltering in caves and have very little food, fresh water or medical supplies.



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