

Canberra displays callous indifference toward storm-ravaged Pacific islanders

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The first direct news of the fate of residents on four remote South Pacific islands ravaged by a severe tropical storm last weekend has come—not from the governments of the Solomons, Vanuatu, Australia or New Zealand—but from a journalist who landed on Tikopia island yesterday.

Geoff Mackley, who had earlier provided the first pictures of the devastation wrought by Cyclone Zoe, found that all of Tikopia's 1,300 inhabitants had survived by sheltering in mountain caves. Homes, crops and fruit trees have been destroyed and the island's freshwater lake is salt-contaminated, forcing the residents to use the juice of young coconuts.

Mackley flew from Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, in a helicopter chartered by the *Australian*. "All the trees are completely stuffed—it's like bare earth. They had 10m waves coming through so the village is completely buried," he told the newspaper. He warned that the lack of proper sanitation raised the danger of disease.

What has happened to residents on three neighbouring islands—Anuta and Fataka, which like Tikopia are part of the Solomon Islands, and Mota Lava, which belongs to Vanuatu—is still unknown. None of the remote islands has an airstrip or the means for radio contact.

In a display of breathtaking indifference for the lives of several thousand people, the major regional powers—Australia and New Zealand—refused to rapidly dispatch aid to the islands. The first supplies and trained medical staff are due to arrive on Tikopia later today or early tomorrow aboard a Solomon Islands patrol boat funded by Canberra—that is, nearly a week after the cyclone struck. A French navy helicopter was finally sent to Mota Lava yesterday.

Grave fears have been held for the islanders ever since Cyclone Zoe, a category five tropical storm and one of the largest ever recorded, hit the area early on December 29. Winds of up to 350kph and huge seas of more than 10 metres lashed the islands for two days, destroying buildings, uprooting trees and contaminating vital supplies of fresh water.

Jeff Callaghan, a senior meteorologist at Australia's cyclone warning centre, commented: "It is the worst possible cyclone. A category 5 can really level buildings. You can be sure there will be some very serious damage." He said his centre had alerted the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and the Solomon Islands government to the gravity of the situation last weekend.

But no government action was taken for days, even though there was no means of communicating with people on any of the islands. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer sought to excuse the response by pointing to logistical difficulties. Freelance journalist Mackley, however, reached Tikopia on Wednesday from the Solomon Island capital of Honiara by chartering a small, single-engine aircraft.

Mackley was unable to land but reported a "scene of total devastation". "Tikopia Island would have been in the eye of Cyclone Zoe when it was at its peak strength. The island is completely denuded of vegetation, almost every building has been damaged, a few remain intact, while others have been shredded, and the sea has come through some villages and run into the lake which is the island's only water source."

But the Australian government and aid officials failed to act. Based on reports from a later overflight by an airforce Hercules aircraft, Foreign Minister Downer declared that the damage and possible death toll were not as bad as originally feared. As he admitted, he had no way of being certain. "There didn't appear from the aircraft, which was at 500 metres, to be people who were injured or casualties but of course there could be. We are just not sure," he said.

At best, the aerial reconnaissance of Tikopia was inconclusive. The situation on the other islands remained unknown. Yet Canberra decided to cancel an air drop of supplies and radio equipment to the islands. Alan March, assistant director-general of the aid agency AusAid, defended the decision, saying: "On the evidence we've seen there is no evidence—albeit from 500 metres—of injuries or casualties." He said some islanders had waved to the aircraft, some had been fishing and "there was no sign of a request for help".

Instead, the Australian and New Zealand governments decided to limit their assistance by paying for relief supplies to be shipped from Honiara—two days travel from the storm-stricken islands. The Solomon Islands patrol boat left yesterday, after resolving a dispute over payment for the police crew, and another vessel, the *Isabella*, is due to leave today. The aid effort will cost the Australian government about \$US40,000, and New Zealand has pledged a similar amount.

The decision immediately provoked criticism. Sinclair Dinnin, an expert on the Solomons at the Australian National University, said Australia had abdicated its humanitarian responsibilities. “Like others, I’m surprised at the fairly low-key approach to what sounds like a very significant human crisis. It seems pretty incredible to attempt evaluation from the air when one would have thought it would have been possible to get people on the ground for an evaluation.”

Another academic, Judith Macdonald, who had lived on Tikopia, branded the Australian government’s excuses as “bullshit”. From the aerial photographs that had been published, she said, it appeared that at least 15 villages had been destroyed. “The pictures seem to show this wonderful great sandy beach—but that’s not a sandy beach, that’s absolute ruin. It is pulverised and the land will be soaked with salt. The freshwater fish in the lake will be destroyed by saltwater,” she said.

Dr Hermann Oberli, who heads the medical team aboard the Solomon Islands patrol boat, told the media that “the seriously injured people will not survive, they will probably be dead by now”. Oberli explained that there was just one clinic on Tikopia “which was not in very good shape already before the disaster”. He said his first priority would be to assess and treat the injuries, then take preventative measures against the outbreak of disease.

It now appears that residents on Tikopia have survived the storm. But the outcome could have been very different, and may still be on the remaining islands. In 1956, a severe cyclone killed 200 people on Tikopea. Tikopians who spoke to journalist Mackley criticised Australian officials for suggesting that their lives had returned to normal. They were dismayed that the airforce Hercules transport had flown over the island on Wednesday but had dropped no food and water.

Following the criticisms of Canberra’s response, the Australian media has attempted to shift the focus onto the Solomon Islands government and its tardy request for assistance. But the Solomon Islands is a tiny impoverished nation, with a population of 450,000. It has been wracked by internecine fighting and political instability for the past four years. Its economy is in a state of collapse. The government,

which is virtually bankrupt, is dependent on small amounts of financial aid from Australia and New Zealand.

The fact that the radio transmitter on Tikopia has been out of action since November and its clinic is “not in very good shape” is symptomatic of the state of the country’s infrastructure. The government could not afford to pay for the fuel and crew to dispatch its patrol boat to the cyclone-stricken islands. Its emergency services are virtually non-existent.

Solomon Islands Disaster Council director Loti Yates heard that Cyclone Zoe was heading toward the country from a local radio news broadcast. He has been forced to fund the council out of his own pocket since 1999 and uses local Internet cafes to maintain contact with regional disaster organisations. “We have no phones, or other communications, they’ve all been cut,” he said.

To pin the primary blame for the slow and inadequate response on the Solomon Islands government is absurd. The Australian and New Zealand governments have the financial and material resources but refused to use them. The amount of aid—around \$US100,000—offered to the cyclone victims is miniscule. By way of comparison, in 1997, Australia dispatched airforce aircraft and a navy warship, at an estimated cost of \$6 million, to search for and rescue British round-the-world sailor Tony Bullimore from his upturned vessel in the Southern Ocean.

The callous indifference toward the fate of storm-stricken islanders reflects the prevailing attitude in official circles in Canberra and Wellington toward the region as a whole. In response to growing economic and political instability, the two countries have aggressively pursued their interests in East Timor, Fiji, the Solomons, Papua New Guinea and elsewhere through a mixture of diplomatic, economic, and where necessary military, bullying with scant regard for the impact on ordinary workers and villagers struggling to survive.



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