

Fiji's cyclone victims still lack food, shelter and clean water

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More than one month after Cyclone Ami devastated Vanua Levu, Fiji's second largest island, its victims have, in many cases, been left to fend for themselves with local authorities unable to cope. People are still struggling to rebuild their homes and to find adequate food and clean water. Only limited international aid has been provided with small contributions from the two regional powers—Australia and New Zealand.

The tropical cyclone hit on January 13, killing at least 15 people and leaving thousands more without shelter, food and water. According to a report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, nearly 2,500 houses were destroyed and another 5,500 damaged. The intense storm damaged power supplies and telephone lines as well as roads, bridges, seawalls and jetties. Over a hundred schools require repairs with at least 70 classrooms destroyed.

Many families lost their crops and have been left dependent on the food aid supplied by relief agencies. On January 28, the *Daily Post* reported incidences of scavenging on local rubbish tips in Labasa and the islands of Taveuni and some of the Lau islands. Health authorities in Labasa ordered the closure of the local tip to stop the starving residents from a nearby shanty town from searching for food scraps.

On February 21, Health Minister Solomone Naivalu told parliament that leptospirosis was endemic in Labasa and that leptospirosis cases had increased dramatically in the cyclone-affected northern division of Fiji. According to Labasa Hospital Medical Superintendent Dr Ami Chand, "Consumption of dirty water is the cause of health problems in the North." Leptospirosis is an acute infectious disease caught by people coming in contact with food, water or soil contaminated with urine from infected animals.

Dr Chand said there was an outbreak of typhoid fever

in Cakaudrove and diarrhoeal cases had peaked at about 60 cases a day. The first person died of leptospirosis on February 11. It was not until February 20 that dengue fever and typhoid were reported to be under control.

In late January, Save the Children Fund National Manager Irshad Ali commented: "We had people coming to us asking for anything to erect a shelter, even asking if they could get a plastic sheet to cover their head. Children are the ones mostly affected in these cases. We found children scavenging for food and trying to get anything that is available in the area."

The reports from the outer islands were similar. In Lau, 375 houses were completely destroyed and 495 were partially damaged. Telecom operator Taukano Takesau on Rabi Island told the Australian Broadcasting Commission on January 25: "[M]ost of our people are homeless, without water, without electricity. I believe that soon our people will be starving." A second supply ship only reached Lau on February 18, more than one month after the cyclone hit.

Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase announced the first distribution of assistance on January 29. He directed all departments to use funds from this year's budget for rehabilitation but admitted that this may prove to be impossible. "I will be discussing the issue with the Public Service Commission to use supplementary funds from within their own budget. But at this stage I really cannot say whether it will be possible," he said.

The following day Deputy Secretary for Regional Development Savenaca Kaunisela said cyclone victims would have to build their own shelters rather than waiting for Government's assistance. Aid worth \$US2,822.40 would be given only to unemployed people with damaged or destroyed homes.

Director of Social Welfare Aseri Rika said his department already had limited funds and "at this stage

the Department of Social Welfare is assisting approximately 4,000 families in the northern Division... We have experienced a lot more people knocking on our doors at the end of last year before that, seeking assistance from us. Last year there was quite an increase but for this year unfortunately we will not be able to assist any more than the 4,000 families that are already being assisted.”

On February 7, Minister for Regional Development Iliatia Tuisese issued a statement, declaring that “most of the work needed in the Cyclone Ami relief operations has been undertaken.” A week later, however, he noted that “the cyclone impact has been costly and is a setback to development for our rural people.” The latest estimate of the overall damage is \$US30 million.

There has been a limited response to Fiji’s appeals for international assistance. Aid and pledges have come from as far away as Greece and Norway. Total aid from Australia, the major regional power, stood at just \$US372,000 at the end of January. By contrast French Polynesia President Gaston Flosse this week handed over a shipment of relief supplies, including 344 tonnes of food, worth about \$US600,000.



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