

Tropical storms and heavy flooding devastate Fiji

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A severe tropical rainstorm has caused major flooding on Fiji's two main islands—Viti Levu and Vanua Levu—leaving local authorities struggling to cope with the thousands of people who have been affected. The storm began on April 8 with wind gusts of up to 90 kilometres per hour accompanied by torrential rain that lasted for more than a week, causing flash flooding and landslides.

On April 8, five people were killed when a landslide swept their bus into the flooded Wainibuka River, north of the capital Suva. Two women died trying to cross a river. In all, 10 people have been killed and another nine are still missing.

Flooding cut off Suva, and some low-lying areas were under six metres of water. Landslides isolated remote communities and cut off any relief efforts. Fiji's National Emergency Operations Centre estimated that 10,000 people were directly affected through damage to crops, roads and homes.

Local parliamentarian Sanjeet Maharaj explained that many families in Rakiraki had all their food and farm stock destroyed. Government authorities refused to release much-needed rations until they received an official assessment of the situation. National Disaster Management Committee (DISMAC) Officer Akapusi Tuifagalele told *Fiji Village* on April 9: "People have to wait because the government team has to make an assessment of the area first."

The International Red Cross was the only organisation distributing any assistance. On April 13, however, Disaster Aid Manager Vili Gauna admitted the aid agency had run out of funds and that its assistance had stopped on April 11.

Many villagers driven from their homes were left to fend for themselves. Some have taken shelter wherever they could find it. On April 15, Nausori police

divisional commander Asaeli Tamanitokula said 100 people were stranded at the Sawani police post without any provisions at all.

Fiji's Director of Health Dr Salimoni Tuga warned that the living conditions of those left homeless heightened the threat of diarrhoea, dengue, typhoid and leptospirosis. One person has already died from leptospirosis, a condition resulting from drinking contaminated water.

On April 19, DISMAC confirmed that 20,000 people have been forced to seek refuge in evacuation centres in the central and eastern divisions. The most marginalised sections of Fijian society have still to receive any assistance.

As late as April 21, the Muslim League Estate squatter settlement in Nabua on the outskirts of Suva had not received any assistance—two weeks after the storm. A resident, Melaia Tikoduadua, said: "Right now we have no other source of income and we are just depending on handouts. We don't have anything left but we're grateful that we're still alive."

Violent tropical storms are not uncommon in Fiji. In January 2003, tropical cyclone Ami devastated the country, killing 15 people and almost destroying the country's sugar crop. Some areas have still not recovered from that devastation.

The Fijian government has a limited national disaster system. Following the latest floods, it has set aside only \$US1.5 million for relief, even though the initial estimate is that at least \$5.7 million in damage has occurred. Director of Roads Mosese Nailumu predicted costs of \$1.7 million just to repair damaged roads. More than \$1.7 million worth of crops have been lost.

As the scale of the disaster has become apparent, far from providing more aid, government officials have blamed the victims for failing to look after themselves.

Principal Disaster Management Officer Eroni Delai told the *Fiji Sun* on April 19: “The people should be better prepared and not wait for the government to hand out everything during a natural disaster. This seems to be the new mentality, and a bad one at that. You can’t expect to sit back when a hurricane comes and expect the government to clean up for you.” The newspaper’s editorial continued in the same vein, declaring “self help is always better (and more lasting) than official intervention”.

The main regional powers, Australia and New Zealand, also reacted to the disaster with indifference. Even though Australian Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs Chris Gallus admitted the situation in Fiji was urgent, neither country has provided significant financial or other assistance. Australia has donated a miniscule \$110,000 and New Zealand just \$31,000.

The response highlights the cynicism behind the recent drive by Canberra and Wellington for greater regional cooperation. At the last Pacific Island Forum meeting on April 7, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark told the gathered Pacific Island leaders that regional interventions were not just about security issues as in the case of the Australian-led military operation in the Solomon Islands.

“We should not think that such a crisis is only a security crisis. There may be health crises. Should we, for example, have a proactive regional response when a health epidemic like SARS... is around?” Clark asked. However, the following day, after the storm began to ravage Fiji, there was no statement from Clark urging assistance and support for the thousands of Fijians affected.

The Australian and New Zealand appeals for regional cooperation are simply a convenient device for pressing ahead with their own economic and strategic interests in the South West Pacific, at the expense of the populations of the small island states.



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