Papua New Guinea flood leaves thousands homeless

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Flash floods have caused extensive damage and widespread homelessness in Papua New Guinea's Oro (Northern) province. The flooding was triggered by heavy rains accompanying Tropical Cyclone Guba, which struck the country's northern coast on November 10. The official death toll stands at more than 150, although this will almost certainly rise. Flooding was so extensive that nearly the whole of Oro province, covering an area of 22,800 square kilometres, has been affected.

The PNG government estimates that up to 150,000 people have been affected and at least 13,000 made homeless. Flooding has contaminated village water supplies and destroyed crops. Health experts have warned of potential outbreaks of diseases including cholera, dysentery, diarrhoea and malaria due to the lack of clean drinking water, poor sanitation and plagues of mosquitoes.

The timing of the cyclone's arrival exacerbated the plight of the tens of thousands of impoverished villagers in the region. Seasonal storms usually only arrive in December, by which time residents have stockpiled food and water and prepared basic shelters. Now, however, there is a critical shortage of vital supplies. Provincial governor Suckling Tamanabae reported visiting the graves of ten people said to have died from starvation. Other survivors are reportedly sustaining themselves by eating coconuts and collecting rainwater.

Relief efforts have been hampered by the general destruction of what little transport infrastructure existed in the region. There are few paved roads outside PNG's capital Port Moresby, with many regional areas connected to the rest of the country by dirt tracks. The lack of infrastructure in the former Australian colony is the consequence of decades of neglect and exploitation by Canberra and other major powers. While PNG is rich in resources, including natural gas, gold, nickel, and copper, most of the population are part of the semi-subsistence village economy.

The floods have destroyed about 95 percent of Oro province's bridges and roads, according to provincial works engineer Andres Kendaura, and have cost an estimated 2 billion kina ($US660 million). Thousands of people can be reached only by helicopter or boat.

The PNG cabinet declared a state of emergency in the province on November 19 and announced a relief fund of 50 million kina.

David Arore, a parliamentarian representing the Ijivitari electorate, criticised the government's response. "The relief supplies have not actually reached the people because first of all, there is no relief supply on the ground because monies are slow in coming," he told Karai Radio after the state of emergency was imposed.

"The relief supplies are not actually on the ground right now. What they [the authorities] are doing is on an ad hoc basis. They are going into the shops and making arrangements with them to get bags of rice out to ship them to these disaster areas. Right now I think the department of finance is to blame because these people are wasting our time and people are dying," he said.

Responsibility for the inadequate aid and rescue operation also rests with the Australian government. Canberra has pledged just $A1 million ($US870,000) in assistance. This represents only a tiny fraction of the resources required to address the immediate needs, let alone the longer-term costs of redeveloping damaged economic and social infrastructure.

The $1 million offer again underscores the Australian ruling elite's contempt for the people of PNG and the

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Pacific Islands. The unfolding humanitarian crisis was barely reported by the Australian media, which was preoccupied with the federal election.

There has been no change in attitude by the new Rudd Labor government. Neither Rudd, foreign minister Stephen Smith, nor the parliamentary secretary for Pacific Island affairs Duncan Kerr has said a word about the disaster in PNG.

Canberra's two main allies in the South Pacific, New Zealand and the US, offered token aid contributions. The New Zealand Labour government pledged $US76,000 and the Bush administration $50,000.

Two Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) C-130 Hercules aircraft flew from Townsville to Port Moresby on November 22 to help relief efforts, while another Australian military plane already in the PNG capital was placed on standby. Three Blackhawk helicopters were also involved in rescue efforts. Australian military forces are reportedly distributing 150 tonnes of relief aid, including rice, tinned fish and meat, tarpaulins, water purification tablets and generators.

This operation took effect on November 26—far too late for many victims of the flooding. Other people have still not received any assistance. According to a Radio New Zealand report on December 2, Governor Tamanabae said half the population of Oro province had not received any supplies. Local health authorities have reported that due to an acute shortage of medical supplies an increase of diarrhoea cases along the coastline cannot be treated.

Even in those areas which have received some Australian aid, relief has been short-lived. John Sea, a Kekerawa village leader, told the *National* that the Australian-distributed supplies lasted just two days. "We took delivery of 15 bags of 10 kg rice, 48 cooking oil (200 ml), 60 tins of fish, eight 40-litre drinking water bottles, 55 blankets, 11 canvas and 450 (10 litre) empty water containers," he reported. "However, the food supplies have run out as it had to be shared among 320 villagers."

An angry reader of the PNG *Post Courier*, wrote: "A surviving relative spoke to me over the phone for the first time since the disaster weeks ago—only this morning (December 2) after walking into Popondetta town. He said he collected one bag of 10 kg rice (no bottles of safe drinking water or cartons of fish for protein, cooking oil, medicine of any sort—nothing!) for his family only on Friday, November 29".

The grossly inadequate Australian response stands in sharp contrast to the enormous sums poured into the so-called Enhanced Cooperation Package (ECP). Drafted in December 2003, the ECP saw scores of Australian police, bureaucrats, and "advisers" installed in key sections of the PNG state apparatus, including the police, finance, treasury and the judiciary. The ongoing operation formed part of Canberra's strategy for bolstering its influence in the South Pacific by taking direct control of the state apparatuses of a number of countries, including PNG, Solomon Islands, Nauru and Vanuatu.

While cast as a "humanitarian intervention", the ECP was driven by a concern to protect Australian capitalism's lucrative economic interests and defend its strategic position against rival powers such as China. The operation was initially budgeted to cost $200 million a year, although actual expenditure was considerably reduced after Australian federal police were forced to leave PNG in 2005.

The disparity is clear—hundreds of millions of dollars are available when required to advance Canberra's strategic and economic interests but only a pittance is offered when it comes to the lives and well-being of ordinary people in the South Pacific.

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