

Thousands displaced in Fiji by severe flooding

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Tropical storms triggered severe flooding in Fiji last weekend, killing at least 11 people. More than 9,000 people have abandoned their homes and are now in makeshift evacuation centres. Meteorological Service director Rajendra Prasad said it was the "worst flooding situation in the recent history of Fiji". Military chief and self-appointed Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama has declared a national state of emergency.

Last week's tropical depression involved rainstorms and flooding that burst river banks, caused landslides and wreaked havoc on the impoverished country's agriculture and infrastructure, including roads, and water, power, Internet and phone services. Fiji has again been put on flood alert as another low depression hit yesterday, bringing more torrential rains.

Fiji's Western Division (covering the western half of the main island, Viti Levu) from Sigatoka to Rakiraki, as well as parts of the Central Division (including the eastern half of Viti Levu), have been declared disaster zones. More than half of those made homeless are from the Western division, with at least 5,000 people taking refuge in 75 shelters there.

Popular tourist and business centre Nadi recorded the highest number of evacuees with more than 1,800. Curfews from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. have been imposed in Ba, Nadi and Sigatoka towns, in order, according to the military regime, to prevent looting. In the Northern Division (which includes the Vanua Levu island) eight landslides were reported late yesterday, cutting two highways.

The death toll is likely to rise. A 35-year-old mother is missing in Vatukoula, after having been caught in a landslide with her daughter and swept over a cliff into a

river. The girl managed to swim to safety. A toddler and a teenage girl were also killed in landslides. A four-year-old boy reportedly died after falling into floodwaters from the balcony of his home.

The sugar industry—one of the main industries in the country—in the Lautoka region has been hard hit. "The damage is currently largely through lodged cane (cane that falls or leans over), water-logged fields, silting, debris imported into the fields and the washing away of recently applied fertiliser," sugar cane growers' spokesman Surendra Sharma said.

"Should the fields remain water-logged, this will compound the damage. If strong winds strike, this could result in cane tops snapping and if this happens, the crop is a total write-off and nothing can be salvaged... Cane farmers have no crop or other insurance. These are the poorest of the poor in Fiji and the very people that cannot afford any losses," he said.

In Ba and Nadi, 90 percent of retailers had suffered damage. Four metres of water flooded Ba's main street and vegetable market. In Nadi, Chamber of Commerce president Dr Ram Raju estimating the damage to business at \$F100 million (\$US55 million). "Almost all shops in town are left with only four walls. All the infrastructure is damaged, with many losing millions of dollars worth of stock," he said.

While details are still emerging, the storms and flooding have caused considerable hardship. Destitute people in Nadi are forced to scavenge for muddy clothes and pots being thrown out by shopkeepers. Supermarkets have prevented scavenging for damaged food items, due to the danger of disease. There have been reports of pending food shortages in many evacuation centres.

Health officials warned of the dangers of typhoid and dysentery. National Bloodbank manager Seru Rokasuka warned of shortages of blood, with less than 100 pints in stock, and appealed for emergency donors.

The tourism industry, already suffering a protracted downturn because of the 2006 military coup, then the world economic crisis, will take a further hit. Resorts have been cut off, with tourists from Australia, New Zealand, the US and Europe unable to reach the airport due to washed out roads. The roads from Nadi to the airport are only partly accessible by four-wheel-drive vehicles. Local staff at many resorts have been sleeping in conference facilities, because the floods have washed their own homes away.

No doubt concerned to pre-empt criticism over the government's limited response to the disaster, junta leader Bainimarama visited authorities and flood victims in Western Division yesterday. "I am disappointed with the delivery of food at the evacuation centres," he declared. "They [the evacuees] should be fed and looked after well. The police and the military should send their teams to the evacuation centres, it is in disarray right now."

The rescue and humanitarian effort has been hindered by the lack of international assistance, particularly from Australia and New Zealand. Canberra has announced additional aid of just \$A150,000 and Wellington \$A82,000—pittances that represent a tiny fraction of what is required. The Fijian government has estimated that the cost of the clean-up for general infrastructure alone is at least \$A17 million.

An article in the *Australian* today, "Fiji on its own in flood disaster", noted that none of the usual logistical support, including military helicopters capable of delivering aid to outlying areas, has been provided.

The reaction by the two leading regional powers underscores their contempt for the plight of ordinary Fijians. The overriding concern remains that of bolstering Canberra's and Wellington's strategic positions in the South Pacific. Relations with Fiji have become increasingly tense, as Bainimarama has turned

to rival powers, particularly China, for support. In response to the flooding, Beijing's representative in Suva pledged \$A41,000 in assistance, and the Red Cross Society of China donated an additional \$A25,000 to the Fiji Red Cross.



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