

Solomon Islands unprepared for flood disaster

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A state of disaster was declared on February 5 in the 12 worst-affected wards of the Solomon Islands where flooding killed at least 10 people. Another 10 were missing, feared dead. Torrential rains from January 29 caused widespread flooding. Homes were washed away and food gardens destroyed, leaving an estimated 20,000 people homeless and without food, out of a national population of about 550,000 people.

The affected areas include Guadalcanal Island, Malaita, Makira and Central Provinces. In the worst hit area of Northwest Guadalcanal Island, about 1,800 families from 270 villages were flooded, and 70 villages had to be evacuated. Road transport to the western part of Guadalcanal has been cut off by the destruction of roads and bridges.

Last week, the Solomon Islands Red Cross estimated that 7,000 people in Guadalcanal were still homeless after two weeks, with most victims sheltering at relatives' or friends' houses. The Ministry of Health warned residents to boil water, warning of a high risk of diseases such as diarrhoea, flu and red-eye.

People were unprepared for what happened. One of the flood victims, Renata Kakae, who was in Honiara's National Referral Hospital with her nine-year-old daughter Mary, told the *Solomon Star* she had lost her husband, brother-in-law and two-year-old nephew. She said that her family was fast asleep at about 2 am when the flood wrecked their home.

"It happened so fast and all I can remember was that we were washed away by the flood from the river that runs not far from us," she said. As she tried to escape, a

log swept her off the ground, injuring her back, legs, hands and ribs and rupturing one of her organs. Her daughter Mary, had injuries to her head, also caused by a log.

It seems that the swift and devastating character of the deluge was worsened by logging operations in the mountains. Disaster Management Office Programs senior manager Julian Maka'a told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio: "Communities are claiming that the problems now were probably caused by a major logging company operating up on the hills beyond those villages, so they suspect that because of bulldozers digging into valleys and blocking streams or rivers they might have built up dams. And so when the continuous heavy rains came last week the dams might probably have burst."

The local press reported that the official response to the flooding was delayed and confused. People had to survive on coconuts and whatever they could find for nearly a week in the affected areas.

Provincial Disaster Coordinator Herrick Savusi blamed the bad weather and poor state of the roads, which he said made it difficult for Guadalcanal provincial police officers to travel to the flooded areas. "We believe the number of injured, missing or dead could be more but because of the lack of resources we cannot confirm anything as yet," he told the *Solomon Star*.

Because roads and bridges were destroyed, small boats with outboard motors had to be used to bring in relief supplies. But those operations were threatened by the rough seas. By chance, a French naval frigate was

on a goodwill visit and could assist in getting food to villages.

Villagers are angry with the government's response. Steven George, a spokesman for Orobau, near Aruligo, said no food supplies reached his area until seven days after the floods hit, and a child had died of hunger. "It broke my heart to see my people suffering, hungry and dying as a result of delays by authorities," George told the *Solomon Star*.

George said he was part of a seven-man delegation. "We swam across the rivers to come here to present our reports to the National Disaster Management Office, Guadalcanal Province Disaster Committee and the province. We were promised, after presenting our reports, that relief supplies would be sent and that we should go home and wait. We waited but until now there are no foods, medical supplies or clean water."

How poorly prepared the Solomon's government is for dealing with disasters was illustrated when a team from the National Disaster Council and the Guadalcanal disaster office was forced to take refuge in Selwyn College because their boat's motor broke down.

The two regional powers, New Zealand and Australia, have offered only a pittance—the New Zealand government pledged \$US50,330 and the Australian government \$62,300. The two countries have reduced the Solomon Islands to the status of neo-colonial protectorate since dispatching troops, police and officials as part of the 2003 Regional Assistance Mission in Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

One proposal for using the money is for the Solomon Island's government to charter ships to get food to affected families and to build a disaster centre. Even if any of the money pledged actually gets to the flood victims, it will barely provide for their immediate food and water needs, let alone rebuild their houses and villages.

The disaster underscores the true nature of the RAMSI intervention—codenamed Operation Helpem Fren (Help a Friend). Far from assisting the impoverished local population, the purpose of the

operation was to reinforce Australian and New Zealand hegemony over the region and ward off rival powers.

RAMSI police assisted with relief distribution, transport, damage assessment and medical evacuations. But since 2003, no training or equipment has been provided to create adequate local emergency services to deal with crises such as the flooding. The Solomon Islands still lack sea worthy boats that can operate in cyclonic seas, helicopters and all-weather vehicles. Infrastructure, including roads and bridges, remains primitive.



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