

Fiji hit by destructive cyclone

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Cyclone Tomas inflicted major damage in parts of Fiji earlier this week. One person was reported killed, while an unknown number of others are believed to have died. Homes, infrastructure, and crops were affected, though the full extent of the storm's impact is still being assessed, with reports continuing to come in from outlying island regions in Fiji's north and east.

The category four cyclone was first felt last Friday, before intensifying on Monday and finally losing strength and moving out to sea yesterday. At its worst, wind gusts of 250 kilometres per hour were registered. Heavy rains and sea surges of up to 7 metres caused flooding in many areas, including low-lying islands.

Early action by residents prevented a significantly worse death toll. Meteorologists were able to provide advanced warning of the relatively slow moving cyclone. Many people in isolated villages who did not receive an official alert still noticed unusual changes in the ocean's swell and evacuated to safer places on higher ground. An estimated 18,000 people assembled at 240 designated evacuation centres, mostly schools and other public buildings.

Fiji's military dictator, Frank Bainimarama, declared yesterday: "It is evident that wherever Tomas has struck, the damage has been overwhelming." The junta lifted a nationwide curfew, but maintained a 30-day state of emergency in the country's northern and eastern divisions.

Worst affected were the Lau and Lomaiviti island groups in Fiji's Eastern Division. Power, water, communication, and sewage systems were disrupted in many parts. The northern coast of the country's second largest island, Vanua Levu, was also hit. None of Fiji's tourist resorts, which generate a significant proportion

of the country's gross domestic product, were affected. Seventeen Australian tourists, however, are yet to be accounted for, according to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Parts of the French Pacific islands of Wallis and Futuna, which lie north-east of Fiji, were hit by the cyclone. Local schools were flooded and about 80 percent of all crops on Futuna were reportedly destroyed.

The Solomon Islands was affected by another cyclone, named Ului, which struck at the same time as Tomas. Ului was far less destructive, however, with no reported deaths or injuries.

Cikobia, one of Fiji's most northern islands, was one of the most severely affected by Cyclone Tomas. Initial local media reports describe the scene as being like a "war zone". Communications were cut for several days before local residents managed to telephone the capital.

"[One] villager described how Hurricane Tomas hovered angrily over the island for four days, throwing up sand, scattering debris, uprooting trees and smashing houses on the island," the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation reported. "The man says the extent of the damage on the island was so huge that it will take them two days to clean their way to the only school near the village."

Similar reports are emerging from Fiji's eastern islands. On the island of Cicia, villagers were forced to take shelter for several days. Lemeki Rasalto, the 83-year-old chief, told the *Fiji Times* that residents were hit twice in 12 hours when the cyclone passed over the island, only for the wind to reverse direction. "It uprooted houses and threw the materials about a

kilometre away from the village,” he said. “We have about 20 houses damaged.”

UNICEF spokesman Tim Sutton has estimated that around 130,000 people—out of Fiji’s estimated population of 850,000—have been affected by the cyclone. In addition to getting emergency relief supplies to those in need, a major concern is to prevent a cholera outbreak within the crowded evacuation centres.

The Fijian government deployed naval patrol boats to provide aid to the affected northern islands. Bainimarama also requested emergency assistance from Australia, New Zealand and France.

The Australian and New Zealand governments announced aid spending of \$A1 million and \$NZ1 million each. With the junta’s consent, both countries also deployed air force planes to deliver emergency supplies—including tarpaulins, water purification kits, and water containers—and conduct reconnaissance operations over the cyclone-affected areas. In a televised national address yesterday, Bainimarama thanked the two governments.

Long experience with natural disasters in the South Pacific suggests that the minimal aid pledged by the major powers will not be extended beyond the immediate humanitarian situation. Virtually nothing will be done to rebuild affected infrastructure or assist those who have lost their livelihoods.

The prompt Australian and New Zealand aid response for Cyclone Tomas may be connected with ongoing tactical debates in foreign policy circles on the possibility of a rapprochement with Bainimarama’s government. Since taking power in 2006, the Fijian military has rejected Canberra’s dictates and turned to other powers for support, most notably China. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) recently called on the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to drop sanctions and normalise relations with Bainimarama (see “Pressure mounts for Australian rapprochement with Fiji”). In January, New Zealand and Fiji agreed to establish additional counsellor’s positions at each other’s embassies.

Whether the cyclone aid is the opening to a diplomatic shift is not clear. However, there are notable differences in Canberra and Wellington’s response to this natural disaster compared with what happened after severe flooding hit Fiji last December. No international air force assistance was provided, and Australian and New Zealand aid was largely funnelled through non-governmental organisations. By contrast much of the current cyclone aid is going to the official National Disaster Management Office.

Jenny Hayward-Jones, director of the Sydney-based Lowy Institute’s Melanesia Program, urged the Rudd government to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the cyclone. “[T]he agreement of Fiji’s government to accept help from Australian and New Zealand military assets is a new development,” she wrote on the think tank’s blog site. “Perhaps all three governments could harness this spirit of cooperation to further their trilateral engagement. A joint visit by Ministers Smith and McCully to Fiji in the next few weeks could be timed to take a look at the delivery of Australian and New Zealand cyclone relief and carry on their dialogue with Fiji’s Foreign Minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola.”



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