

Flooding in Fiji kills seven, leaves thousands homeless

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1 February 2012

Flooding and landslides in the South Pacific nation of Fiji began on January 22 and continued last week, killing seven people and leaving thousands homeless on Viti Levu, the country's largest island. The situation appears to be further worsening, with heavy rains reported today. The Nadi Weather Office previously issued a cyclone warning, although the threat has been downgraded to flash flooding.

More than 3,500 people were forced to flee their homes last week to 74 makeshift evacuation centres established in schools, military bases and government buildings on Viti Levu. Water levels reached between four and six feet in the western city of Nadi, a popular tourist destination, and along parts the island's north coast. The northern towns of Tavua and Ba were reportedly the hardest hit.

On January 26, the military government of Commodore Frank Bainimarama declared a "state of natural disaster" across Viti Levu, and this remains in place in Nadi, Lautoka, Raki Raki, Ba and Sigatoka.

Among those killed were a family of four—a 35-year-old father, 30-year-old mother, and their one- and three-year-old daughters—who were buried alive in their home by a January 25 landslide in Tukaraki, near Ba. Two farmers were swept away by currents on January 23 and 24 while attempting to save their livestock. A 26-year-old man was killed earlier today after being struck by debris from a swollen river in Yasawa Island, north of Viti Levu.

The poorest sections of the population are the most vulnerable to flooding and landslides. An assessment by the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and

Advocacy revealed that 1,150 families had been made homeless in small and impoverished farming communities outside Nadi and Lautoka alone.

Bridges to several remote areas have been destroyed, making humanitarian assistance difficult. *Fiji Times* reporter Felix Chaudhary described a January 28 trip between Lautoka and Ba: "Matawalu village was completely washed out. Homes were invaded by knee-deep slimy sludge and villagers were frantically attempting to clear this, fearing the outbreak of disease from sanitation overflow. As the men cleared the muck, women sat on the roadside and on firm ground pondering what to prepare for meals ... all root crops and vegetables had long been deposited into the sea by the surging floodwaters."

There is a severe shortage of clean drinking water, particularly in Ba, where bridges connecting water pipes to half the town's residents were swept away. Australian Red Cross worker Bob Handby reported that the government had installed some water tanks in the area, but was unable to supply sufficient fresh water supplies, resulting in strict rationing for residents. The Red Cross plans to set up a portable water treatment plant for the area. On Sunday, the non-governmental organisation "Friend" told the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation there was also a severe food shortage in Ba and Tavua.

The World Health Organisation has predicted a rapid rise in mosquito numbers and warned of an increased threat of waterborne diseases, including typhoid, dengue fever and leptospirosis. Three people were admitted to Nadi hospital last week with typhoid, commonly contracted by drinking sewage-

contaminated water. Two of the sufferers were staying in an evacuation centre.

Many farmers have been left destitute due to damage to sugar cane plantations caused by landslides and debris, including tree trunks and silt, deposited in their fields. All four sugar mills on the north coast have been damaged. A preliminary government assessment reported that about 55 percent of export crops—sugar and foodstuffs, including taro and papaya—were affected by the flooding. The sugar industry remains one of Fiji’s key exports, despite a protracted decline in output, and the flood damage will likely worsen the country’s economic crisis.

The devastating impact of the heavy rains was exacerbated by the lack of adequate government preparation and the substandard infrastructure throughout the country.

Ministry of Works spokesperson Iliesa Sokia admitted to the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation that inadequate underground drainage was responsible for the flooding of Nadi and Ba. Residents in different areas of Viti Levu told the media that the floods were at least partly due to inadequate river dredging to deepen the water courses. The Nadi, Waikela and Ba rivers all burst their banks, flooding the surrounding towns and forcing people to flee to higher ground.

One Ba resident, Angela Deo, told the *Fiji Times*: “We’ve been having these kinds of problems for several years and still nothing is being done.”

The government contemptuously denied any responsibility. Sharon Smith-Johns, the permanent secretary for the Ministry of Information, declared: “We can dredge rivers and we can put the infrastructure in as much as possible, but sometimes you can do all you can but you are still going to flood.”

The region’s dominant powers, Australia and New Zealand, have responded with indifference. The likely economic costs of lost exports and infrastructure reconstruction have been estimated at around \$30 million. Canberra and Wellington have pledged a combined total of just \$534,000. Washington has

promised another \$50,000. Fiji’s Red Cross today said it was still waiting for money promised by Australia and New Zealand, and had so far only received emergency funding from the British government.

The response again serves to expose the bogus nature of the major powers’ claim to support the well-being and democratic rights of the people of Fiji and the region.



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