

Fiji again devastated by floods

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For the second time in three months, thousands of people in the Pacific island state of Fiji have been severely affected by floods over the past two weeks. Residents, farmers and small business operators in low-lying areas of the west of the main island, Viti Levu, had not recovered from January's disaster when their houses and properties were again inundated. Seven people are confirmed dead, and an estimated 14,000 people, including 5,000 children, have been forced to abandon their homes.

Many people were caught by surprise by even worse flooding than in January, and had to be rescued from partly-submerged houses. A March 31 *Fiji Times* report by Felix Chaudhary provided a glimpse of the emergency: "Strong winds blew roofs off homes, sending people fleeing for shelter in neighbouring residences and schools, and businesses closed as the rain continued, causing rivers, creeks and waterways to spill floodwaters, closing roads and washing away bridges and walkways." The worst hit towns of Ba, Nadi and Rakiraki were "overcome by surging torrents of floodwaters ... the likes of which have never been seen before."

About 13,000 people were still in evacuation centres over the Easter weekend, mostly camped in schools. In an attempt to open schools this week, officials said they were looking at alternatives, even tents, to accommodate evacuees. The military regime headed by Commodore Frank Bainimarama insisted that schools would recommence, despite conceding that children would not be able to attend if their parents were still recovering from the floods.

Heavy rain yesterday caused further flooding between Lami and Navua, adding to the woes of poor villagers. Namuka Settlement resident Ivamere Fifita told the *Fiji*

Sun: "It is worse when it rains heavily or during high tide and it's a health risk for our children because they have to walk through this flooded, muddy and soggy road, which could lead to diseases like scabies."

There is a rising danger of water borne and communicable diseases. Many areas lacking safe water supplies and electricity is still rationed or cut off across the island's west. The Ministry of Health last week reported 177 cases of leptospirosis, 112 of dengue fever and 104 of typhoid.

After roads to the international airport in Nadi were cut, the government initially asked airlines to stop flying tourists into the country—a request thought to be unprecedented for Fiji, whose economy depends on tourism for about a third of its gross domestic product. Flights were resumed last week, even though power was still lacking in some areas.

Reports indicate that any recovery from the floods will be slow and difficult. In Nadi (population 42,000), businessman Riyaz Ali told *fijivillage.com* the situation was bleak as residents came to terms with the scale of the damage. "It's not a sight for the faint-hearted; the devastation is utter and complete," he said. "There's nothing left in most homes and you can see the look of desperation in people's eyes."

January's floods killed 11 people and affected more than 319,000 people in low-lying areas of Nadi, Lautoka and Ba. An estimated 55 per cent of export crops, mostly sugar cane, were destroyed. Fiji officials estimated the damage bill at around \$F30.6 million (\$US17 million).

The recurrent flooding has been worsened by rampant and unplanned commercial development, including

deforestation upstream in the highlands. Along the coast, the capacity of rivers and streams to discharge water has been compromised by the construction of tourist resorts and residential complexes.

In Nadi, residents pointed to increased amounts of soil being carried down the Nadi River, forming a silt barrier at the river's mouth, pushing water back toward Nadi. Along the seashore, Nadi's first big tourism development, Denarau Island, was established in the 1970s. Now, the coast is dominated by some of the world's biggest brands—Hilton, Sofitel, Westin, Sheraton, Peppers and Wyndham—with tidal mangrove flats giving way to reclamation and concrete.

Visiting the flood disaster zone, Bainimarama paid lip service to addressing the structural issues. He told New Zealand's Radio Tarana: "We will have to make some hard and fast decisions on what you do with infrastructure, with the rivers, with the dredging."

Yet the regime's preoccupation has been to get the tourism industry operating again as swiftly as possible, downplaying the extent of the damage. "We've had a lot of floods but we'll get back on our own two feet," Bainimarama told reporters. The government's head of tourism, Elizabeth Powell, said: "Fiji's tourism has quickly returned to business as usual ... as regular visitors to Fiji know, the country is extremely resilient and once storms or rains pass, Fiji is back to normal in a matter of days."

Likewise, Bainimarama bluntly told sugar cane farmers, many of whose crops have been totally destroyed, to start re-planting immediately and not to expect substantial government assistance. "I know it is hard to lose so much during this flood but we cannot sit back and wait for other people to plant for us," he declared.

Similarly, the owners of Vatukoula Gold Mines were anxious to assure the global financial markets that the catastrophe was unlikely to affect production, despite a "minor accident in the shaft." At the height of the rains, water carrying debris entered a shaft, injuring 11 miners riding in a cage to the underground workings. Fortunately, the injuries were not serious, and were

treated at a neighbouring medical clinic.

While feigning concern for the flood victims, the United States and the two regional powers, Australia and New Zealand, pledged pitifully inadequate aid. The US offered just \$50,000, Australia \$1 million and New Zealand up to \$1.25 million. The first overseas delegation to visit Nadi and Ba to distribute assistance came from China, although the size of its aid package was not reported.

Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Bob Carr claimed that "as a neighbour, Australia has always been committed to providing humanitarian support to the people of Fiji." But the puny nature of Australia's contribution was highlighted by a call from Fiji's Sugar Cane Growers Council for foreign governments to re-channel into disaster relief the hundreds of millions of dollars of aid they had cut off since Bainimarama's 2006 military coup.

Far from being concerned for the plight of the people of Fiji, the response of the US and its South Pacific allies has been dictated by their geo-strategic calculations. Since 2006, they have imposed trade and travel sanctions on Fiji and withheld aid in order to apply pressure to Bainimarama, who has shown a defiant willingness to turn to China for aid and investment in recent years.



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