

After devastating Samoa, Cyclone Evan hits Fiji

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Cyclone Evan began to hit Fiji last night and today, as it continued to move across the South Pacific. In Samoa, the tropical weather system left at least four people dead, with eight missing, and an estimated 200 injured after striking the small island nation on Thursday.

The storm, which was upgraded to a category 4 cyclone after leaving Samoa, intensified as it approached Fiji, with gusts of up to 230 kilometres per hour reported by meteorologists. Wind speeds reached up to 165 kilometres per hour when the cyclone swept through Samoa.

The cyclone passed over the tiny French territorial islands of Wallis and Futuna on Sunday, temporarily cutting communication with the outside world and damaging infrastructure. No deaths were reported, but an estimated 20 houses were damaged.

Strong winds have already struck parts of Fiji, cutting power and water supplies. Some bridges and roads have been badly damaged in the north. The Fiji Meteorological Service expects the cyclone to pass just north of Vanua Levu Island today, and southwest of Suva, the country's capital, tomorrow.

The Fijian government has established evacuation centres, particularly in the north and west of the country—the areas expected to be most severely affected. These facilities are reportedly sheltering more than 2,000 people. The military regime announced a curfew as the cyclone approached, and warned that the storm would affect all Fijians. There are fears that coastal villages and towns in low-lying areas may be flooded.

The cyclone threatens Fiji's agricultural sector, which accounts for the livelihood of the overwhelming majority of people, and around 18 percent of gross domestic product.

The Samoan government announced a state of disaster in the wake of the cyclone. The country's National Emergency Operations Centre said the damage was as severe as that from a 2009 tsunami, which killed 129 people. The extent of the damage is only gradually emerging, with disaster assessment teams travelling across Upolu, the most severely affected island, during the weekend. The situation in outlying islands is unclear. Eyewitnesses described the storm as the worst in 20 years to strike the cyclone-prone nation.

The four fatalities occurred when the Vaisigano River, running through the centre of Samoa's capital Apia, burst its banks leading to flooding that swept away cars and debris. Flash flooding engulfed hundreds of homes in the east of Apia where the river reportedly expanded from 10 metres wide to an estimated 400 metres. Residents likened the flooding to an "inland tsunami". Eyewitnesses reported seeing roofless houses, industrial containers perched on top of homes, and upturned cars.

At least two of those who drowned were children. Those still missing are believed to be mostly fishermen. Searches for them continued today, but there are grave fears for their safety.

Sieni Voorwinden, a resident of Apia, told the *New Zealand Herald* she spent a night huddled with her children, in fear that the roof of their home would be blown away. "It was so scary," she said, "At times I feared for my life ... We had nothing, so we just prayed a lot." An Australian living in Samoa said he received a number of distress calls through his radio. "People were ringing in and saying 'I'm in the rafters with my kids, please help me'," he said.

Their comments substantiate other reports indicating that residents were not given sufficient warning, and

were unprepared for the severity of the storm. In addition, once the cyclone hit, power outages limited their ability to receive information about the progress of the storm.

At least 4,500 people have been displaced and are now living in emergency shelters, with little prospect of returning to their damaged homes in the immediate future.

Disaster authorities announced on Friday that electricity was down across the country, and the Tanugamanono power plant had been “completely destroyed”, threatening to leave large sections of the population without power for up to two weeks. Trees and power poles were also uprooted, blocking major roads and hampering rescue efforts.

The storm has resulted in significant damage to Samoa’s infrastructure, much of which was badly hit by the 2009 tsunami. The main hospital reportedly has had power restored but the other hospitals continue to rely on backup power generators. The previously drought stricken island has severely limited access to running water across the country.

There are also fears that the cyclone will result in food shortages in Samoa, which depends heavily on a limited range of crops for export and subsistence.

Reporting from Apia, journalist Cherelle Jackson, told Radio Australia: “Most of the mountains have been stripped bare of leaves and trees and so all the plantations have been affected. You’ve got taro, grapefruit and banana all affected. Once we get over this, the cyclone itself, we’re going to have major food issues afterwards.”

Underscoring the callous indifference of the governments of the major regional powers, the New Zealand National Party government of John Key donated just \$US42,000 toward immediate “on the ground” relief efforts in Samoa over the weekend, and allocated one air force plane to search for the missing. Australia’s Gillard Labor government offered an unspecified amount of aid to Samoa and Fiji.

New Zealand ruled Samoa as a colonial power from 1914 until 1970. New Zealand businesses extracted large profits from the islands while it was under colonial rule, including through the coconut oil trade, and then used the country as a cheap labour platform following the establishment of formal independence.

During the 2009 tsunami, residents criticised the

Samoaan government for failing to provide sufficient warning of the impending disaster. Aid workers denounced the failure of New Zealand and Australia to mobilise the resources needed for rescue and reconstruction efforts. The latest disaster indicates that little has changed.



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