

Cyclone Evan causes serious damage in Fiji

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Tropical Cyclone Evan tore through the northwestern side of the main Fiji islands of Vanua Levu and Viti Levu on December 17. While it did not claim any lives, Evan carved a path of destruction that will result in ongoing hardship and distress for many of the country's poorest people.

According to a Radio New Zealand report on December 28, power and water had been restored to the country's Northern Division, but it would be up to three weeks before electricity services were fully restored in the Western Division, which includes much of the main island of Viti Levu.

Before hitting Fiji, Evan had struck Samoa on December 13, causing widespread devastation and killing four people (see: "After devastating Samoa, Cyclone Evan hits Fiji").

The category four cyclone battered Fiji with wind gusts of up to 270 kilometres an hour, flattening homes, destroying farms, ruining crops, uprooting trees and tearing down vital infrastructure such as power poles. Bridges were submerged and roads closed by landslides.

Some parts of the country recorded 200 mm (about 8 inches) of rain over a 24-hour period, causing substantial flooding and giving rise to a continuing danger of water-borne and communicable diseases, such as dysentery, dengue fever and cholera.

During the storm, more than 8,000 people sought refuge in emergency shelters in the north and west of the country. Hundreds, made homeless, still remain in shelters. During and following the storm, power was shut off in some areas because of the danger posed by falling power lines, including in the main tourist town of Nadi. Airlines grounded flights to and from Fiji, stranding about 1,900 visitors.

The government of self-appointed Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama has downplayed the full extent of the damage and the health risks, out of fear of

discouraging tourists—one of the mainstays of the Fijian economy—and to cover up its slow response in providing assistance to some of the worst hit and more isolated areas.

Just days after the cyclone, government spokeswoman Sharon Smith-Johns told Radio Australia that while houses had been damaged "there wasn't any great pockets of massive destruction anywhere."

However, Methodist clergyman Reverend Akuila Yabaki, who heads the Citizens Constitutional Forum, said the damage was "far worse than what was being depicted by the government," adding: "It is apparent that while there have been no deaths, the damage is worse than from any other cyclone."

The mainstream media, including in Australia, have provided little reportage of the damage, reflecting official indifference to the plight of the people of the Pacific. The Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard is providing just \$US1 million each to Fiji and Samoa in emergency assistance and relief supplies, while the New Zealand government will give just slightly more—\$NZ2.4 million (\$US1.97 million).

Five days after the storm, many villagers still had not spoken to a government official and had received little or no official aid. The first Australian military plane carrying emergency supplies, including tarpaulins, sanitation kits and basic hygiene supplies, did not arrive in Fiji until late on the night of December 19.

Reports are surfacing that give a clearer picture of the extent of the damage facing hundreds of ordinary people, especially in isolated villages and in locations that can be reached only by boat.

In villages on Waya and Naviti islands, 40 homes were destroyed and many more were severely damaged. Bedding and clothing were ruined. Most of the farms in the area, along with crops, were destroyed, leaving people without access to fresh food. Waya was among

the worst affected islands in the Yasawa Group.

In Yamata Village, on Wayalailai in the Yasawa Group, the wooden home of 76-year-old Viliame Vatunitu was destroyed. Vatunitu only avoided serious injury because he had moved to his nephew's home just before the cyclone struck. "I have nothing saved," Vatunitu told reporters. "Even now I am still looking for my only basket of clothes." He appealed to the government for assistance.

More than half the 125 homes in the Nabutu Settlement, a coastal village in Lautoka that is home to around 300 people, were ripped apart by the powerful winds or the waves that smashed down a metre-high concrete sea wall. The settlement's timber church was crushed under a fallen tree. In Bua, 84 houses were destroyed and 52 were partly demolished. In Macuata, 23 houses were destroyed and 72 partly ruined.

According to initial assessments by the Fiji Red Cross Society, as many as 600 houses were severely damaged in Lautoka. While some repair work had begun on partially-destroyed homes, it would be January before work commenced to rebuild those that had been demolished.

In the Western Division alone, the damage to school buildings and educational equipment was estimated to be around \$5 million. Authorities admitted that this amount could increase substantially as investigations continued. Education officer Lorima Voravora said some schools "were completely wiped out," including the Bukama Primary School, which lost most of its classrooms.

In Lautoka, the damage to schools could be as much as \$3 million, without counting the schools affected in the Yasawa and the Mamanuca groups. With little government assistance in sight, students may have to attend classes in tents when the new term starts next year.

There will be grave consequences for Fiji's economy, which was already deeply in crisis. The western coast, which took the brunt of the cyclone, is home to the country's sugar cane and tourism industries.

The sugar cane industry, which accounts for 22 percent of Fiji's gross domestic product and employs around 40,000 people, or 25 percent of the paid workforce, was hit by flooding twice earlier this year. That caused extensive damage to the cane rail system, access roads and processing mills, and required the

replanting of some 2,000 hectares of cane.

The economy is still suffering the effects of trade and travel sanctions imposed by Australia and New Zealand following the 2006 military coup that installed Bainimarama. Earlier this year, the Australian government lifted most of the sanctions, in line with US attempts to counter China's emerging influence in Fiji and the South Pacific.

This rapprochement with the Bainimarama regime demonstrates that the sanctions were not imposed out of concern for the democratic rights of the Fijian people but were bound up with the strategic interests of Australian and New Zealand imperialism in the region. Any further aid from these regional powers will undoubtedly be conditional on advancing Washington's "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific, heightening the tensions with China.



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