

Tongan cyclone leaves thousands homeless

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Emergency officials in Tonga have reported that 70 percent of homes and buildings in the country's northern Ha'apai group of islands were either damaged or wiped out by Cyclone Ian, which hit last weekend. Cyclone Ian is the worst storm to hit the tiny impoverished Pacific country in more than 50 years.

One woman died, and thousands were left homeless as the cyclone hovered above the Ha'apai island group for more than six hours last Saturday. Officials say they have "serious concerns" for residents on more than 20 low-lying islands. Pangai, the regional administrative centre with a population of 2,000, was devastated by the compact tropical storm that reached category 5 with gusts up to 287 kilometres per hour. Essential services, including public buildings, the main hospital with all its medical supplies, and the airport's traffic control tower were ruined.

Some reports have put property losses as high as 90 percent. Damage across the country would have been much greater had it not been for the cyclone bypassing the main islands of Vava'u in the north and Tongatapu, with the capital Nuku'alofa, in the south.

Tonga's Director of Emergencies Leveni Aho said it was "almost unbelievable" there weren't more fatalities. Aho said the cyclone's destructive path was unusually narrow and did not create major flooding.

The worst-affected Ha'apai archipelago has more than 50 islands and is home to 8,000 people. There was extensive damage to housing and infrastructure including water, telecommunications and power. Many residents who eke out a subsistence existence now face food shortages after their crops were destroyed. Fresh water supplies are dwindling, in part because people rely on roof rainwater catchment systems that were damaged or destroyed in the storm.

Lucy Oakshott from the Oxfam charity organisation said the lack of communications was making it extremely difficult to assess the situation: "We can't

get hold of anyone. We're well established there and we have lots of contacts but we can't get hold of anyone."

The UN is working with Tongan disaster officials to help coordinate relief. However, the response by the two main regional powers, New Zealand and Australia, has been derisory. New Zealand's Foreign Affairs Minister Murray McCully made a paltry commitment of \$NZ50,000 (\$US42,000) for "specific requests" for assistance. A NZ Air Force Orion reconnaissance aircraft has also been sent to complete an aerial damage assessment. Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop announced that Canberra will provide \$A50,000 (\$US45,000) in emergency supplies.

The Tongan government, apparently wary about the strings attached to offers of "aid" by the neo-colonial powers, has so far refused to formally ask for international help.

Writing in the *Dominion Post* on Tuesday, Fairfax Pacific affairs correspondent Michael Field reported that Tonga was being "vague" about aid offers, and wanted to be seen relying on its own resources. According to Field, Tonga's deputy prime minister Samiu Vaipulu bluntly asserted the country "didn't need foreign help."

Pacific states have become pawns in an increasingly fierce rivalry between the major powers active in the region. Last August, in response to deepening tensions over China's growing influence, McCully suspended \$NZ10 million in tourism aid to Tonga. The move was in retaliation for Tonga's acceptance of a gifted Chinese Xian MA60 aircraft, which it intended to use to expand local air services. New Zealand company Chatham Pacific, which provided existing domestic inter-islands flights, promptly closed its operations, claiming it would be driven out of business.

New Zealand's response was widely regarded in the Pacific as blatantly punitive. In an interview with the

Fiji-based *Islands Business* website, Vaipulu angrily demanded that Wellington not “put its nose into local affairs” and said Tonga would explore “other options” if New Zealand continued to suspend tourism aid. “We may go to China or we have some reserve funds but we must find a way to do it,” Vaipulu said, adding that New Zealand had been interfering in Tonga’s internal affairs “for years.”

The devastation caused by Cyclone Ian is set to intensify the political and social crisis within the island kingdom.

Tonga has verged on sovereign debt default for the past year with around 60 percent of its debt owed to China. According to journalist Michael Field, Prime Minister Siale’ataongo Tu’ivakano recently fired his finance minister, Lisiate ’Akolo, while he was in Auckland, for moving to raise civil servants’ wages, calling him “disobedient, arrogant and uncooperative.” When ’Akolo returned to Tonga, security guards were placed at the Legislative Assembly to stop him from entering. ’Akolo claims to still control the treasury but according to the government, King Tupou VI has now approved a rival—’Aisake Valu Eke—as his replacement.

The in-fighting comes amid immense resentment within the population over poverty, inequality, and the rule of the autocratic monarchy, buttressed by a layer of hereditary tribal “nobles.”

In 2006 Nuku’alofa’s town centre was looted and razed by demonstrators protesting the royal family’s stranglehold over the government and society. The unrest came amid deepening hostility towards the monarchy from both ordinary Tongans and dissatisfied sections of the business and political elite. A so-called “pro-democracy” movement, backed by New Zealand and Australia, represented business and middle-class elements who resented the monarchy for monopolising the country’s wealth and political power, but had no fundamental differences with the regime’s right-wing economic and social agenda.

Despite cosmetic measures undertaken in 2008 to “democratise” the regime, Tonga remains an oppressive monarchy in which a handful of nobles control a third of the seats in parliament, while the remainder are elected in a popular vote. Prime Minister Tu’ivakano, a member of the nobility, is not directly elected.

The grinding poverty and lack of services that are

endemic across the South Pacific are only exacerbated by the impact of the frequent natural disasters that affect the region, along with the economic exploitation of the major powers. Further crises in Tonga and neighbouring island states are likely as the summer cyclone season advances.



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