

# Major floods devastate Solomon Islands

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Torrential rain, high winds and severe flooding devastated Solomon Islands on April 3, killing 21 people, destroying thousands of homes, and displacing over 50,000 people, mainly in Guadalcanal province and the capital Honiara. The impoverished Pacific nation, which includes 300 separate islands, lies about 1,800 kilometres east of Papua New Guinea.

National Disaster Management Office chief Loti Yates said: “This is by far the worst flooding I have witnessed since heading this organisation—the scale and magnitude is overwhelming.”

As of yesterday, two people remained missing, with at least 10,000 homeless in Honiara alone. The Isabel, Makira and Malaita islands are among the other Solomons provinces severely impacted. Extensive damage to basic infrastructure, however, has made it impossible to fully assess the impact in communities outside the capital.

Honiara and other parts of Guadalcanal have been declared disaster zones, with major damage to roads, water pipes and sewerage systems. Honiara’s Chinatown Bridge collapsed last Thursday, splitting the city in two. According to the Solomon Islands Water Authority, 50 percent of the capital, which has a population of about 65,000, has no access to safe water and it could be weeks before supplies are restored.

Aid organisations have warned that diseases such as dysentery, malaria and dengue fever could spread and seriously worsen the catastrophe. Solomons Islands Save the Children Fund spokesman Graham Kenna told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that a dengue fever outbreak had already begun before the floods and warned that the numbers hit by the disease would rapidly increase.

The response of the Australian and New Zealand governments and other Pacific powers to the crisis underscores their utter indifference to the plight of the country’s ordinary working people.

Australia offered \$3 million in total, with only \$2 million for “immediate humanitarian needs.” New Zealand promised \$1.12 million, with only \$281,000 for agencies directly working with the flood-affected people. The US pledged just over \$100,000 for emergency relief through the French Red Cross Society.

This is for one of the poorest countries on the planet, lacking the resources and infrastructure to cope with a disaster of this magnitude. Solomon Islands has a gross domestic product of approximately \$2,500 per person—ranked 177th in the world.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said the remaining \$1 million of Canberra’s “aid” would be used to send Australian Civilian Corps engineers, Australian Government Rapid Response Team members and a dozen Australian Defence Force personnel to the Solomons.

Australian Federal Police attached to the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which was established in 2003, are also involved.

The RAMSI intervention, cynically codenamed Operation Helpem Fren (Help a Friend), has always been promoted by the Australian and New Zealand governments and the mainstream media as an “aid mission.” Its real purpose remains to maintain Australian and NZ economic and political domination over the under-developed nation and the wider southwest Pacific.

Alongside RAMSI troops and police contingents, Australian and NZ officials took control of key government posts, refashioning the state apparatus in line with the interests of Canberra and Wellington. More than 10 years on, the mayhem and human suffering caused by the flooding underscores the fact that RAMSI was never about uplifting the country’s facilities and living standards.

No RAMSI resources were allocated to establish

adequate health services and other vital infrastructure, or the sort of equipment required to respond to flooding, earthquakes and other natural disasters.

RAMSI's military forces were withdrawn in 2012, but about 100 Australian Federal Police remain, at a budgeted cost of \$500 million over four years—many times more than the flood aid. Contingency plans no doubt exist for troops to return whenever Canberra and Wellington consider there is a threat to their imperialist interests.

Canberra's principal concern about this month's flooding is revealed by its commitment of \$600,000 for technical assistance to assess the damage to the Gold Ridge mine, which is operated by St Barbara, an Australian mining company.

RAMSI police officers were also dispatched to help secure the mine after St Barbara abandoned it following the flood. There is widespread speculation over the mine's future because of recent falls in St Barbara's share values.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo warned parliament that protection of the mine and rebuilding of the severely damaged Mataniko Bridge, which provides access to the mine, were priorities.

"If this bridge collapses," he said, "policing in town [Honiara] would be in real danger and the normal flow of social and economic services would be really affected ... What we have done last night is deploy members of the Police Response Team to go and maintain security up there [to Gold Ridge] because that asset belongs to the state."

Lilo's government approved a \$SI15 million fund (\$A2.19 million) to be distributed to members of parliament, with each MP receiving \$SI300,000. The Pacific Media Centre reported that some MPs visited evacuation centres around Honiara, distributing assistance to those they thought would vote for them in national elections later this year.

On April 8, the National Disaster Operations Committee said it was safe for people to leave the overcrowded and inadequate evacuation centres and return home. But more than 50,000 people remain homeless, with no access to clean water and basic food supplies.

The so-called aid pledged by Australia and New Zealand will barely provide for the immediate food and water needs of flood victims, let alone rebuild their

houses and villages. Those rendered homeless will be forced to live in tents and other makeshift shelters for months.



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