

“Super cyclone” Pam hits South Pacific islands

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Vanuatu is being hit by the “super cyclone” Pam, a category 5 storm cell—the highest possible rating for a cyclone—which struck the small Pacific island nation last night and had its worst impact early this morning. The full scale of the damage is yet to emerge, but thousands of homes are expected to have been destroyed and there are unconfirmed reports of dozens of people killed. The storm had already left a trail of destruction in the Solomon Islands.

The greatest damage is expected in remote isolated villages on the 83 islands that make up Vanuatu, a nation of 270,000 people. Communication with many of these areas has been cut by the storm. The UN stated yesterday that while there were no confirmed fatalities, there had been an unconfirmed report of 44 people killed in the country’s Panama province. A “red alert” for Vanuatu’s southern provinces remains in place, including Malampa, Shefa and Tafea.

World Vision emergency communications officer Chloe Morrison, who is in the nation’s capital, Port Vila, said the city was littered with roofs from homes, along with uprooted trees and downed power lines. Wind speeds in the capital reportedly reached up to 340 km/h, generating sounds compared by those present to a freight train. Morrison said there was no running water or power in Port Vila.

“There are reports from other colleagues of mine of entire villages being literally blown away overnight,” Morrison told the AAP. “Local houses and leaf huts would have been picked up like confetti last night,” and tin roofs had been stripped off houses.

Many remote islands are low-lying and are particularly vulnerable to storm flooding. Local weather authorities categorized the waves whipped up by the storm as “very rough to phenomenal.” There are also fears that the storm will trigger landslides, which

could bury villages and contaminate water supplies.

As with all such “natural disasters,” cyclone Pam is exposing the consequences of mass poverty and the lack of basic infrastructure. Thousands of people live in makeshift shanty towns in the nation’s capital, Port Vila.

Thousands will be left homeless in coming weeks and months and left to fend for themselves. Up to two thirds of the population relies on subsistence agriculture of yams, taro and sweet potato and face the destruction of their crops.

Earlier last night, Save the Children managing director Tom Skirrow said that up to 50,000 children were at risk. “We have been going door to door in some of the poorest slum areas and I’m hugely concerned not enough is being done to make sure children and families are safe,” he said. “Thousands of families are living in makeshift, flimsy houses which will not withstand the immense winds and rain we’re expecting,” he said.

While thousands of people have taken shelter in evacuation centres, public buildings such as schools and churches, even these have not escaped undamaged. Charlie Damon from CARE Vanuatu said that some “have been flooded and some evacuation centres have also lost parts of their roofs too, but those on the outer islands they certainly will be feeling the brunt of this as they just don’t have the facilities as we do in Port Vila.”

UNICEF worker Alice Clements said many people were without proper shelter when the storm hit. “There’s a problem with the lack of suitable shelters here. So people are scared and they’re not entirely confident, necessarily, that the shelters that they’re in are appropriate to see them through the storm.”

The storm is the largest to strike Vanuatu since the

1987 cyclone Uma, which killed up to 48 people and left 5,000 homeless. Vanuatu Meteorological Service acting director David Gibson told the *Guardian* that Pam was likely to be the largest storm to ever hit Vanuatu, saying Uma was a category 4 at its strongest.

While Vanuatu has borne the greatest brunt of the storm, parts of the Solomon Islands, in particular Tikopia Island and Anuta, have been severely hit. Brian Tom, a spokesman for the country's National Disaster Management Office, told *Checkpoint* that Tikopia had lost 90 percent of its food crops and fruit trees, and the water was contaminated. Storms were still preventing emergency response operations. While there have been no reported fatalities, Tom said that some had been injured by falling trees.

The Pacific Island nations are among the most impoverished countries in the world. Vanuatu has an annual GDP per capita of approximately \$US3,276. The most recent UN Human Development Index ranking places it at number 131 out of 186 countries worldwide. The Solomon Islands ranks even lower, at 158.

The Australian or New Zealand governments are yet to formally announce any aid to the affected countries. Australian High Commissioner Jeremy Brewer told reporters in Perth today that he had spoken to Vanuatu Prime Minister Joe Natuman offering Australian help. "We are still assessing the situation but we stand ready to assist," he said.

Whatever funding is allocated to the disaster-affected regions will be a miserable pittance compared to what is truly required. The "aid" supplied to Vanuatu, like numerous other Pacific island countries, is to advance Australian interests. It includes funding for Australian Federal Police and other officials integrated into the country's state apparatus with the aim of ensuring continued Australian domination in the region.



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