

At least 29 dead, thousands displaced after Cyclone Winston hits Fiji

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On Tuesday morning, the official death toll from Cyclone Winston, which struck the South Pacific country of Fiji on Saturday, rose to 29. The category five storm has been described as the most powerful ever recorded in the Southern Hemisphere, generating winds of up to 325 kilometres an hour and leaving a trail of destruction. Some low-lying areas have been engulfed by floodwaters.

Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama's military-backed government declared a 30-day state of emergency and deployed the army to affected parts of the country.

The death toll from the disaster is expected to continue to rise in coming days as initial contact is made with the hard-hit areas in remote regions of the multi-island state. At least four people are missing at sea, while more than 8,000 have been displaced after their homes were destroyed. The country's total population is less than a million.

The tropical cyclone made landfall on the northeastern coast of Viti Levu, the country's main island, on Saturday evening. Coastal areas were hit with gale-force winds and massive waves, while power and phone lines were downed across the country. Some 80 percent of the population was without power within hours of the storm striking.

Communication with six islands and islets, Vanua Balavu, Lakeba, Cicia, Nayau, Taveuni and Qamea, was cut-off shortly after the storm hit. Aerial photographs taken in the past days over the islands of Taveuni, Lau, Koro and Rabi and others in the northern and eastern divisions of the country revealed the destruction wrought by the storm. Entire villages were completely flattened.

According to local witnesses, 80 to 90 percent of homes have been levelled in the southern half of

Taveuni Island. At Kade village on Koro Island, all structures were reportedly felled, including the school, church and community hall. Eight bodies were found on the island early on Tuesday. Across the country's eastern division, at least 150 homes were demolished, while more than 60 were severely damaged.

The disaster has created a mounting humanitarian crisis, with thousands of people still housed in around 735 makeshift evacuation centres. Aid groups have warned of the threat of disease outbreaks, with safe drinking water and power unavailable and food supplies tainted in many parts of the country.

The poorest are the most vulnerable. Thousands reside in improvised tin shacks. Over 250,000 people, some 35 percent of the population, live below the poverty line. Many crops have been damaged or destroyed, threatening livelihoods and imperiling subsistence farmers.

Radio New Zealand spoke to people in the Lovu squatter settlement, which is home to some 300 families on Viti Levu. One of them, Vena Chand, commented: "We're afraid of having some kind of disease ... the itching has started. And the muddy water that we walk around ... and the mosquitos around in the houses."

"Everything was very nice before ... but now we feel like crying all the time. And no help, nothing, we have to do everything ourselves," she said. Residents have been forced to travel to neighbouring areas with buckets in search of drinkable water.

Michael Naisau, a pastor, said: "This is one of the poorest settlements ... and the least supported by our business people. For some of them it's back to zero, there's really nothing."

The cyclone has underscored the growing vulnerability of island nations in the Pacific to extreme

weather events. According to climate scientists, warmer sea temperatures, stemming in part from climate change, contributed to the severity of the storm. The region is also affected by the El Niño weather pattern, which involves warming of the central and eastern tropical Pacific, producing a host of extreme weather events.

Ocean surface temperatures were the warmest on record in 2014, while sea temperatures have reportedly risen in the Pacific this year. Climate experts have noted that records do not go back far enough to establish a definite trend, but have warned that ongoing warming will likely result in storms of greater intensity developing more frequently.

In March 2015, the South Pacific was hit with Cyclone Pam, a category five storm that affected at least 132,000 people, or almost half Vanuatu's population, and left an estimated 21 people dead. In December 2012, Cyclone Evan killed at least 14 people in Samoa, and caused widespread destruction in Fiji.

In addition to heavy storms, Fiji and other Pacific island nations face rising sea levels. Last year, Bainimarama's government said it planned to relocate 45 coastal communities over the next five to ten years. It has already begun moving villages inland.

Above all, the severe social consequences of natural disasters throughout the region are a product of the endemic poverty and low-level of economic development that is the legacy of imperialist domination over the South Pacific.

Following the cyclone, the response of the two regional powers was paltry. The Australian government announced it would provide \$5 million in emergency aid, while New Zealand contributed just over \$2 million.

Both governments, however, are dispatching military aircraft. Australia offered to send two Orion surveillance planes and army transport helicopters. New Zealand deployed a C-130 Hercules military plane, ostensibly to deliver aid, along with a surveillance craft. As in previous natural disasters, both countries are using the disaster as an opportunity to test the waters for extending the presence of their militaries in the region, while likely cultivating contacts and gathering information that could be of future use.

Geo-strategic tensions are rising in the Asia-Pacific, stemming from the US government's pivot to Asia to

confront China. Fiji has strengthened ties with China and received two shipments of arms from Russia this year, to the consternation of Washington and its allies in the region, Australia and New Zealand.



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