

Tens of thousands homeless in Fiji cyclone disaster

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The death toll from Cyclone Winston, the category five storm that struck Fiji last Saturday, has risen sharply in the past days as authorities have made initial contact with outlying islands and remote areas that were the hardest hit.

This morning, the official death count stood at 44, but is expected to continue to increase. Many people remain unaccounted for, and entire regions have been left with virtually no assistance. According to media reports, at least 122 people were injured during the storm, with around 45 hospitalised.

The cyclone, the worst-ever recorded in the Southern Hemisphere, has created a mounting humanitarian catastrophe, with up to 45,000 people homeless or staying in temporary evacuation centres. That is nearly 5 percent of the country's entire population of one million.

According to Radio New Zealand, a spokesperson for the Fijian government, Ewan Perrin, indicated that the official number of people displaced by the storm had risen by 20,000 on Wednesday alone, as contact was established with heavily affected areas. Perrin said some 22,000 people were living in evacuation centres in the country's Western Division, another 16,000 in the Central Division, 4,000 in the Northern Division and 3,000 in the Eastern Division.

People are being housed in makeshift and often overcrowded accommodation in schools and churches, which are ill-prepared to meet their most basic needs. There is little prospect they will be able to return to their flattened homes in the near future.

Entire districts were levelled by the cyclone, with hundreds of homes decimated and basic infrastructure down. In Rakiraki district on the north coast of the main island, Viti Levu, over 1,000 homes were destroyed.

Villages have been wiped out on many of the smaller islands. In at least one village on Koro, among the worst affected islands, all 90 houses and structures, including a church, school and local administration building, were demolished.

Joseph Hing, a UNICEF worker, wrote that Koro "looked like someone took a torch and just burnt from one side to the other." Describing his team's approach to the island on Tuesday, he said: "As we sailed closer, we started to smell the dead carcasses of livestock that were floating past the ships. When we smelt those, we knew that this disaster was really, really bad."

Thousands of people are now endangered by a lack of clean drinking water, potential food shortages and the threat of disease. In many areas, power and running water have yet to be restored, and roads are badly damaged. Wells, which are a primary source of water for many villages, have been contaminated with mud and debris, while the structures that cover outdoor latrines have, in many cases, been torn off by the gale-force winds.

Aid organisations have warned of the threat of an outbreak of disease, including Dengue fever and the incurable Zika virus. Both are spread by mosquitoes, which are proliferating in pools of stagnant water from the storm.

The cyclone has had a devastating impact on the impoverished country's economy. Finance Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum said yesterday the storm has resulted in more than \$1 billion in damage. In some areas, as many as 100 percent of crops have been destroyed, threatening longer-term food supplies and livelihoods. The sugar industry, which employs 200,000 people, is expected to lose \$83 million from the disaster, with industry figures saying it is too late to replant damaged crops.

There is reportedly growing anger over the social crisis and lack of assistance. Vinesh Naidu, whose home was largely destroyed in northern Viti Levu, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on Wednesday he is living in one leaky room with his wife, daughter and mother. Two of his fingers will need to be amputated as a result of injuries suffered during the storm.

Naidu expressed frustration over a lack of government aid. “We can see helicopters are coming, just making rounds and going but there is no help,” he commented. “At least if they can give us some water. Even if we don’t eat we can at least drink water and fill our stomach.”

The humanitarian catastrophe in Fiji, a British colony from 1874 to 1970, intersects with the growth of geo-strategic tensions in the region, stemming from the US-led military build up throughout the Asia-Pacific. As in previous such disasters, Australia and New Zealand, the two regional imperialist powers, are using the havoc wrought by the cyclone to test out an expanded military presence in the region.

On Thursday, the Australian government announced it would dispatch to Fiji the HMAS Canberra, the country’s first amphibious assault vessel, launched in November 2014. Four Globemaster cargo planes, helicopters, Orion surveillance aircraft and 32 Australian defence personnel were sent to Fiji earlier in the week. New Zealand sent a C-130 Hercules military plane and surveillance aircraft.

The *Australian Defence Magazine* described the deployment of the HMAS Canberra as “a huge test for the Navy’s new amphibious ... asset.” In 2013, the Australian Strategic and Policy Institute, a government-funded think-tank, noted that the development of vessels with amphibious capabilities was critical for Australian operations in the South Pacific, given that countries in the region “often have low-grade infrastructure, especially in terms of ports, wharves and cranes, let alone airports.”

Washington, and its junior partners in the region, Australia and New Zealand, have previously registered their hostility to Fiji’s close ties with China, and media commentators have expressed concern over two Russian shipments of arms to Fiji this year. In a show of support, China gave \$100,000 to the Fiji Red Cross, making it the first country to send aid, according to

Chinese state news agency Xinhua.

The Australian ruling elite is using the latest disaster as a dry-run for future operations throughout the South Pacific. It is also undoubtedly watching to see if the havoc created by the cyclone will produce a political crisis for the military-backed Fijian government of Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, which has had tense relations with Canberra.

An article in the *Diplomat* on Thursday pointedly noted: “Last year, Cyclone Pam made a direct hit on Vanuatu, devastating the country. In the months after the storm, Vanuatu’s political system nearly imploded, with a quarter of the parliament jailed on corruption charges.”

The newly-released Australian Defence “White Paper” which calls for a dramatic expansion of military expenditure, labelled a “secure nearer region” in the South Pacific as one of Australia’s core “Strategic Defence Interests.” It warned: “Instability in our immediate region could have strategic consequences for Australia should it lead to increasing influence by actors from outside the region with interests inimical to ours”—a clear reference to China and Russia.



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