

# Fiji cyclone: Australian and New Zealand military mobilised for “humanitarian” relief

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The Australian and New Zealand governments have utilised the devastation of Fiji caused by Cyclone Winston to send ships, aircraft and hundreds of military personnel to the impoverished former British colony in the South Pacific.

The category-five cyclone that struck on February 20 was the worst-ever recorded in the Southern Hemisphere, with winds at over 280 kilometres per hour. It killed over 40 people, levelled wide areas of the country’s islands, rendered 54,000 people homeless and affected 350,000 people, nearly 40 percent of the total population.

Hundreds of schools have been damaged or destroyed, and health facilities have been severely damaged. Scores of towns and villages lack access to water and electricity, and face potential food shortages and the outbreak of diseases such as Dengue fever or the Zika virus.

While thousands of Fijians desperately need assistance, Australia and New Zealand have seized on the disaster to advance their own geo-strategic interests. The two imperialist powers regard Fiji, the largest and most strategically-located South Pacific state, as critical to their hegemony in the region. Their military intervention dovetails with their role in Washington’s “pivot to Asia” to assert its domination over the Indo-Pacific region, especially against China.

HMAS Canberra, Australia’s new naval flagship, arrived in Fiji last week carrying over 850 military personnel, including doctors and engineers, as well as 50 vehicles, three heavy-duty helicopters, three amphibious landing craft and tonnes of relief supplies. The Canberra, a command and helicopter dock ship, is being used as platform to deploy equipment and troops for debris clearing, engineering assessment, water purification and medical aid.

New Zealand has sent HMNZ Canterbury, a multi-role sealift vessel, and HMNZ Wellington, a patrol ship, and about 500 combat engineers, soldiers, sailors, pilots and medical crews, as well as helicopters, landing craft and other vehicles. This is New Zealand’s largest non-combat mobilisation in the southwest Pacific since World War II.

According to the *Australian* newspaper, this is the first time that the Australian and New Zealand militaries have worked together with the Fijian defence forces since the 2006 military coup led by Commodore Frank Bainimarama, the current prime minister.

When Bainimarama seized power, the Australian and New Zealand governments denounced his takeover, fearing it would undermine their influence. They imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions and cut off military assistance. This had nothing to do with defending democratic rights in Fiji but was driven by concerns that the coup could destabilise the region and open the way to Chinese influence.

The sanctions, however, backfired. Bainimarama responded with a “Look North” policy, seeking and receiving economic, diplomatic and military aid from China, Russia and elsewhere.

Bainimarama travelled to Beijing and met with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang in 2014, securing various deals, including some infrastructure funding and the training in China of 300 senior public service, government and police officials. The Chinese People’s Liberation Army also signed “closer cooperation and technical assistance” agreements with the Fiji military.

In recent months, Fiji took delivery of two shipments of arms and equipment from Russia, accompanied by promises of military training. The second arms shipment arrived just before Cyclone Winston.

Bainimarama, who has previously denounced the domineering role of Australia and New Zealand in the South Pacific, welcomed the arrival of the HMAS Canberra, reportedly sending a thankful text message to Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop. “The people of Fiji were delighted to see such a physical manifestation of Australian support,” Bishop told reporters in Canberra.

Bainimarama, however, also welcomed assistance from China, which has now pledged more than \$US8 million in aid and relief supplies, including tents, blankets and generators.

The Australian and New Zealand governments are promoting their intervention as a “humanitarian and disaster aid” mission. But the use of the military in response to natural disasters in order to defend strategic interests was specifically emphasised in the Defence White Paper released by the Australian government last month.

“Instability in our immediate region could have strategic consequences for Australia and we will continue to take a leading role in providing humanitarian and security assistance where required,” it stated. The White Paper listed this role as one of the main “drivers” of “Australia’s security environment,” bound up with a commitment to the US “pivot” and to Washington’s preparations for a military confrontation with China.

Euan Graham from the Pentagon-backed Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) underlined this strategic connection in an article posted on the CSIS web site on March 1.

“In the South Pacific, inter-state threats are less of a concern than the perpetual issue of state fragility, which could easily absorb the deployable strength of the ADF [Australian Defence Force]. The DWP [Defence White Paper] affirms an ambition for Australia to continue playing a leading role in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR),” Graham wrote.

“The importance of this noncombat role was underscored even as the DWP was being launched, as Australia’s new flagship HMAS Canberra prepared for its first operational deployment to Fiji to assist in the wake of Tropical Cyclone Winston. At a time when Australia’s traditional sway in the South Pacific is being challenged, the importance of HADR as a source of influence and goodwill should not be

underestimated.”

Anthony Bergin, deputy director of the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute, bluntly spelled out these geo-strategic considerations in yesterday’s *Australian* newspaper.

Canberra’s level of assistance, Bergin declared, was part of a message to the Fijian prime minister to “not forget who your real friends are ... The response is not just driven by the humanitarian motive. It also has a diplomatic overlay ... of really being prepared to significantly deploy the military capabilities for this. The disaster response is an ... easier way to show that it [the Pacific] is still our patch.”

In 2009, military strategists developed detailed plans for the invasion of the Fiji and Papua New Guinea as part of a Defence White Paper drawn up for the Rudd Labor government. The secret plans, which were presented to the federal cabinet’s National Security Committee, were based on scenarios in which Australian military forces would intervene to suppress an outbreak of “civil strife” or the “breakdown of order.”

The current “humanitarian” intervention has provided the Australian and New Zealand militaries with the opportunity for a large-scale military mobilisation and a logistical dry-run for an intervention into Fiji or other South Pacific states. Like every other part of the globe, the South Pacific is being riven by the mounting aggression by the US and its allies, directed against any threat to their hegemony, particularly from China and Russia.



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