

Cyclone Gita leaves thousands homeless in Tonga

Tom Peters
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Tonga, an impoverished Pacific island nation with a population of 107,000, was devastated by Cyclone Gita on Monday night, leaving thousands of people homeless. The cyclone also caused significant damage to Samoa and American Samoa last weekend.

The system headed away from Tonga and last night intensified to a category five storm before hitting Fiji's isolated southern Lau group of islands. Communications to the islands, home to 2,500 people, were cut off and extensive damage is expected. With storm surges up to 7 metres high predicted, residents were told to evacuate to higher ground.

Gita was the worst cyclone to hit Tonga in decades. The main island of Tongatapu and neighbouring 'Eua experienced wind gusts of 230 kilometres per hour. Emergency workers estimated that 40 percent of houses on Tongatapu lost their roofs. Many homes were flooded. On Monday night 5,700 people fled to evacuation centres.

There is extensive damage to schools, churches and other buildings and infrastructure in the capital, Nuku'alofa. The parliament building was flattened. The meteorological service lost its roof, rendering it incapable of updating the cyclone's progress. Power lines came down and Tongatapu and 'Eua remain almost entirely without electricity. Water has been cut off. Many roads are still impassable and no full assessment of the damage has been carried out.

Graham Kenna of Tonga's National Emergency Management Office told the *New Zealand Herald*: "It's the worst situation I have been in. A lot of the old heritage buildings, some that have stood for over 100 years, have been destroyed."

Rural areas, where the majority of the population lives, are largely cut off. Red Cross volunteer Vanessa Heleta told Radio NZ crops and fruit trees on the

eastern part of Tongatapu were flattened, leaving many people desperate. Most Tongans rely on subsistence farming for food.

There have been two confirmed deaths. On Tuesday night a 72-year-old man died of a heart attack after being rushed to hospital. An elderly woman was killed when her house blew apart while she was inside. More than 30 people have sustained injuries.

Samoa and American Samoa also reported widespread flooding and damage to residential buildings and businesses. While the damage is apparently less severe than in Tonga, Radio NZ reported that 200 people in Samoa needed emergency shelter and 800 in American Samoa were still in evacuation centres yesterday.

Aid agencies have warned of the danger of infectious diseases spread by contaminated water and flooding. Tonga, Fiji and Samoa are already experiencing an outbreak of mosquito-borne dengue fever. Radio NZ reported that the Ministry of Health confirmed 53 cases on Tongatapu this summer. The disease is sometimes fatal without proper treatment. A 12-year-old New Zealand girl died last month after contracting dengue in Tonga.

The cost of Cyclone Gita has not yet been estimated, but undoubtedly amounts to hundreds of millions of dollars. The imperialist powers in the Pacific have so far allocated a pittance in aid. The Australian government has sent an Air Force plane with just \$AU350,000 worth of aid to Tonga.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern mouthed sympathy for Tonga on Radio NZ yesterday, saying "we see ourselves as having a huge responsibility here... [to] meet the need." Her Labour Party-led government, falsely promoted as progressive by the media and pseudo-left groups, has deployed an

Air Force Hercules to Tonga with a mere \$NZ750,000 worth of assistance. Wellington has sent just \$50,000 to Samoa.

In fact, New Zealand's record demonstrates the utterly callous attitude of its ruling class toward Pacific people following natural disasters.

Cyclone Ian, which hit Tonga's Ha'apai group of islands in January 2014, caused an estimated \$US50 million in damage and economic losses. That storm destroyed crops and about 450 houses. Reconstruction was plagued by delays and a lack of funds. The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank pledged around \$US16 million in grants and loans, while the New Zealand government gave around \$US4 million.

One year later, the Tongan Red Cross reported that only 50 houses in Ha'apai had been rebuilt and most people were still living in tents. In August 2017, three years after the cyclone, Radio NZ reported that 75 homes were still to be rebuilt.

Across the Pacific, the impact of natural disasters such as Gita is exacerbated by poverty and run-down housing and infrastructure, the products of more than a century of colonial domination. Thousands of people in Tonga, Samoa and Fiji live in poorly constructed shacks, incapable of withstanding hurricanes and cyclones.

All three countries are heavily exploited by Australia and New Zealand as a source of cheap migrant labour, particularly seasonal agricultural work. Samoa was ruled ruthlessly by New Zealand until it became officially independent in 1962.

Any aid or military intervention by the imperialist powers is dictated not by humanitarian motivations, but geostrategic interests. The US, Australia and New Zealand regard the growing Chinese and Russian economic influence in the Pacific as a threat to their own hegemony in the region.

Following Cyclone Winston, which destroyed villages in Fiji in 2016 and killed 29 people, New Zealand and Australia utilised the disaster to deploy hundreds of military personnel to the former British colony.

The operation, New Zealand's largest non-combat mobilisation in the Pacific since World War II, amounted to a military exercise and show of force, particularly directed against China, which had established significant ties with the Fijian government.



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