

COVID-19 and tropical cyclone hit South Pacific Islands

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Tropical Cyclone Harold, the most powerful storm to hit the Pacific in over two years, has left a trail of death and destruction across the region. In the Solomon Islands, 28 people went missing, feared dead, after being swept off a boat in the oncoming storm.

The passengers were travelling to the island of Malaita on April 3, following government instructions for people to return home due to COVID-19. Rescue efforts were hampered by limited resources because of the coronavirus crisis. Although the country has no confirmed cases, the sole rescue helicopter could not fly because a pilot was in quarantine.

The cyclone developed into a category 5 storm, pounding Vanuatu on April 6–7 before heading on to Fiji. With winds as high as 235km/h, the slow-moving system passed directly over Vanuatu's main island of Santo while hundreds of people sheltered in evacuation centres.

Luganville, a town of 16,000 people, has been cut off by flooding, landslides and debris. Up to 70 percent of buildings were damaged, roofs were blown off houses, trees snapped and the council building destroyed. Radio New Zealand described a ship shoved ashore by ferocious waves and rivers spilling over banks, forcing people to flee villages and hide in caves.

Telecommunications provider Vodafone reported a network outage in the islands of Banks, Santo, Malekula and Pentecost. Save the Children's Luke Ebbs told the media there was "immense" destruction: "In some parts of Santo Island not a single building or structure is free of damage. Homes have been flattened to the point they are unrecognisable." Many families had lost almost everything and urgently needed humanitarian assistance.

The cyclone was particularly ill-timed for Vanuatu, with a caretaker government in charge following

inconclusive elections last month. While there are no reported coronavirus cases, Vanuatu borders are sealed, and gatherings of more than a few people banned. The interim government has relaxed the state of emergency as it contends with the dual crisis, allowing people to travel to seek shelter and go to evacuation centres.

Meanwhile, intensive horse-trading is underway in an attempt to form a government. The Graon Mo Jastis Pati, led by Foreign Minister Ralph Regenvanu, won nine of 52 seats while caretaker Prime Minister Charlot Salwai's Reunification of Movement for Change and the Vanua'aku Pati both won seven. It is unclear who will emerge as prime minister.

Cyclone Harold moved on to Fiji as a category four storm on Wednesday, with winds of up to 195km/hr. The National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) activated 250 evacuation centres.

The town of Nadi was flooded and left without power after the Ba River burst its banks. Low-lying areas in the capital Suva and Nausori were flooded while many homes suffered damage. The NDMO urged villagers on remote islands and coastal areas to move to higher ground.

With Fiji's tally of COVID-19 cases currently at 15, the government would not lift its lockdown and curfew restrictions. Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama said people must only evacuate if flooding posed a risk and claimed that contingency plans were in place to prevent any mixing between evacuees and Fijians who were close contacts of COVID-positive patients.

Suva went into lockdown after two cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in the city. More than 300,000 people are confined to their homes, and all non-essential businesses closed for at least two weeks. "Cyclones can kill and so can coronavirus. As we combat these two life-threatening crises, it's vital that

every Fijian do exactly what they are told to do by authorities,” Bainimarama said.

The government has deployed the army to help the police enforce a “zero-tolerance” policy for COVID-19 violations. More than 500 people have been arrested for breaching restrictions. Bainimarama, a former military coup leader, said that the country was “at war” with the virus and warned any “disobedience in our ranks” would be dealt with severely. “We don’t care who you are. Rules are rules,” he declared.

Cyclone Harold had again strengthened to category 5 as it moved away from Fiji and headed towards Tonga on April 9. The capital, Nuku’alofa experienced strong winds, power outages and extensive flooding from an accompanying king tide. Tonga’s government has announced a state of emergency because of the cyclone, after a similar declaration in March aimed at preventing the emergence of COVID-19.

The twin crises underline how vulnerable the peoples of the impoverished Pacific nations are. Cyclone Harold is the most serious since Cyclone Pam, which destroyed much of Vanuatu in 2015, setting livelihoods, infrastructure and the economy back years. Cyclone Winston, which hit Fiji in 2016, left up to 45,000 people, nearly 5 percent of the country’s population, homeless or forced into temporary evacuation centres.

The legacy of colonialism, poverty and underdevelopment, including severely rundown hospitals, renders Pacific nations particularly vulnerable to such disasters. There are currently more than 220 confirmed cases of COVID-19 across the region including six deaths. The measles epidemic in Samoa last year, which killed 83 people, gives an indication of the devastation that this coronavirus could inflict.

The Asian Development Bank has warned that Pacific countries will see economic growth fall by at least 0.3 percent in 2020, but this is likely an underestimate. Fiji, Vanuatu and the Cook Islands have announced short-term fiscal bailout packages as tourism has collapsed. Samoa and Tonga rely heavily on remittances from expatriate populations, who themselves face mass unemployment.

Papua New Guinea’s Treasurer Ian Ling-Stuckey last week said the country faced its worst economic crisis since World War II and estimated that the value of its

exports will plummet by at least 13 percent as the prices of resources collapse.

The humanitarian catastrophes intersect with intensifying geo-strategic tensions, stemming from the US-led military build-up throughout the Pacific. As in previous disasters, Australia and New Zealand, the two regional imperialist powers, are only interested in using the havoc to assert their interests and push back against China.

Beijing has sent medical supplies and protective equipment to several Pacific countries and has committed small sums of money to some. In response, Australia’s Morrison government announced that a \$2 billion infrastructure lending facility, part of its Pacific “step-up” policy, will be used to help the region recover from the pandemic. Another \$1.4 billion in aid already earmarked for the region will be allocated to combat COVID-19 outbreaks.

This expenditure, which basically directs already existing commitments, is totally inadequate to deal with the scale of the crises. New Zealand, for its part, this week deployed an Air Force Orion to Vanuatu to undertake aerial surveillance of the cyclone damage and has made available a paltry \$500,000 fund for relief items. Wellington’s total support to Vanuatu, including for coronavirus support is just \$US1.5 million thus far.



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