

Cyclone Yasa leaves thousands homeless in Fiji

Tom Peters
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Fiji's government declared a 30-day state of national disaster after the Pacific island nation, with a population of 934,000, was devastated by Tropical Cyclone Yasa on Thursday. Two people have been confirmed dead, a three-month-old baby and a man in his 40s. Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama yesterday told the media, "We sadly expect fatalities to rise."

The powerful category five storm has been more damaging than Tropical Cyclone Harold, which hit Fiji and several other countries in April, causing flooding and millions of dollars in damage in Nadi and parts of the capital Suva.

Bainimarama said the damage from Yasa would likely surpass 2016's Cyclone Winston, one of the most destructive ever in the Pacific, causing \$1.4 billion worth of damage. He tweeted that since 2012 the country has suffered 12 cyclones, adding: "This is not normal. This is a climate emergency."

Fiji's second-largest island of Vanua Levu, with a population of 136,000, bore the brunt of Yasa, with wind gusts of up to 350kph (217mph). Local journalist Lice Movono told Newstalk ZB that it was "absolutely terrifying, never seen anything like it before, it was so long and just so ferocious." Boats disappeared from the water and houses were flattened.

The storm has made thousands homeless. There were 23,430 people in designated evacuation centres yesterday. Save the Children's Fiji chief Shairana Ali told Agence France-Presse: "quite a few villages... are reporting that all homes have been destroyed."

The full scale of the damage is still becoming clear. Some villages had not been contacted by today due to severely damaged roads as well as power and communications outages. Flood warnings remain in place due to continuing rain; the Rewa river near Suva is reportedly rising.

The destruction of crops that have been flattened or covered by floods and landslides will compound the hardship facing families. Half the population, and almost everyone in rural areas, depends on small-scale agriculture for food and income.

The government has pointed out that climate change is leading to more frequent and intense storms. Bainimarama has repeatedly criticised Australia, New Zealand and other regional powers for failing to take action to halt carbon emissions and to assist Pacific islands, which are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters.

In Vanuatu, the worst-hit country from Cyclone Harold, isolated parts of the country went several weeks without any aid. Eight months later, rebuilding is still slow.

The impact of the cyclones is also made worse by social inequality and poverty, which has soared due to the global coronavirus pandemic. Many families live in poorly constructed shacks that cannot withstand severe storms.

The United Nations found that at the start of 2020 nearly 211,000 people in Fiji, 24.2 percent of the population, lived in poverty, earning less than \$5.5 per day. It estimated that in the worst-case scenario this could increase to 37.5 percent of the population due to the pandemic.

Fiji has reported only a small number of COVID-19 cases, but the closure of borders and the global economic crisis triggered by the pandemic has had a severe impact on workers and farmers.

Tourism and travel, which previously accounted for 34 percent of gross domestic product and employed 40,000 people, a quarter of the workforce, has been completely wiped out. Many who lost their jobs have been forced back into reliance on subsistence

agriculture. Overall, one third of workers had lost their jobs or had their hours cut by mid-2020.

Remittances from family members working abroad, which contributed 5.5 percent of household income prior to the pandemic, have also been impacted by the global downturn and a wave of redundancies internationally.

Like other small Pacific countries, Fiji, which only became independent from Britain in 1968, remains extremely underdeveloped. Its population is exploited as a source of cheap labour, particularly for agricultural industries in Australia and New Zealand. The closure of borders means even this seasonal employment has been closed off to Pacific workers.

So far, international aid has barely begun to trickle into Fiji. Radio NZ reports that the Red Cross will distribute \$140,000 worth of supplies over the next month in the worst affected areas. UNICEF says it is helping to distribute “water, sanitation and hygiene items... medical supplies and equipment.”

The New Zealand and Australian governments view the disaster as an opportunity to further strengthen military ties with Fiji. Both countries have sent air force planes to survey the damage without making actual funding announcements. NZ Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta said New Zealand would distribute “emergency relief kits,” and funding would be made available as requested by Fiji.

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne similarly stated on Saturday that leftover aid from Cyclone Harold was being distributed. She declared that “Fiji and Australia have become more than just neighbours—we are family.”

The regional imperialist powers have zero interest in the welfare of the Fijian people. Their aim is to ensure close relations with Bainimarama, a former military leader who was installed in a coup d'état in 2006.

The government rules through anti-democratic methods, including attacks on freedom of the press, the banning of municipal elections, and intimidation of political opponents. Last month the Fiji Law Society wrote to Acting Police Commissioner Rusiate Tudravu to express concern about hundreds of reports of police brutality since 2015, including the recent death of 46-year-old Mesake Sinu, who witnesses say was severely beaten by police officers.

The state is enforcing extreme levels of inequality

and deepening austerity measures, including cuts to the health system. The country is unprepared for a serious outbreak of COVID-19 and many other diseases.

Retired surgeon Dr Eddie McCaig told a State of Human Rights panel, hosted by a number of non-government organisations, that there was a severe shortage of essential medicines, including an absence of drugs for HIV patients. According to the *Fiji Times*, he said that “80 percent of our diabetics are poorly controlled because they have no drugs, they have no laboratory testing, and the list goes on and on.” Diabetes affects 15 percent of the population.

Yesterday Bainimarama tweeted: “These storms may be getting stronger, but they will never be stronger than we are as a people. Resilience is in our bones.” The reality is that his government, backed by the imperialist powers, has protected the wealth and privileges of a few, while masses of ordinary Fijian workers and farmers remain more vulnerable than ever to natural disasters, poverty and disease.



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