

Pacific Island of Vanuatu devastated by twin cyclones

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9 March 2023

The small Pacific nation of Vanuatu, 2,600 kms north east of Sydney, is under a state of emergency after two cyclones and two earthquakes hit in as many days last week.

Tropical Cyclone Kevin built to a category four on March 4 as it passed the capital Port Vila and travelled south-east. Wind gusts reached up to 230 kilometres an hour in the early morning hours.

Hundreds of people were in emergency evacuation centres as destructive winds and heavy rainfall hit. No casualties were immediately reported but a number of properties were flattened and many homes and businesses reported power outages.

Initial reports from Vanuatu's National Disaster Management Office indicated about 80 percent of the country's population of 320,000 has been affected, including 125,500 children. Many still remain without power, clean water or telecommunications.

Cyclone Kevin came just two days after category four Cyclone Judy, that caused widespread damage and flooding. Cyclone Judy battered Port Vila the previous Wednesday, cutting power and forcing some residents to evacuate.

Port Vila experienced the full force of Kevin's winds. Evacuations took place in the capital. Vanuatu journalist Dan McGarry told Radio NZ Port Vila had been "badly knocked about." Fuel was in short supply and a boil water order was in effect. UNICEF's Eric Durpaire said: "It's crazy, Vanuatu is used to natural disasters, but I think this is the first time it has had two cyclones back to back."

Prime Minister Ishmael Kalsakau announced a state of emergency last Friday, saying the cyclones had created a "sad state of affairs." He called on local authorities to "support the communities in their clean-up and prevent the spread of diseases." Boats were advised to avoid going to sea and a red alert was in effect for Tafea province, home to just over 30,000 people.

As with all such "natural disasters," the twin cyclones are exposing the consequences of mass poverty and the lack of basic infrastructure. Thousands of people who live in makeshift shanty towns will be homeless in coming weeks and months and left to fend for themselves.

Up to two thirds of the population relies on subsistence agriculture of yams, taro and sweet potato and face the destruction of their crops. According to McGarry, vulnerability to the impact of the cyclones was most evident in poorer communities, many in rural areas. "The most vulnerable are those living in impromptu housing... they're the ones who lost their houses and had their belongings destroyed," he said.

Dickinson Tevi, secretary general of the Vanuatu Red Cross Society, noted that medical centers, hospitals, and schools have been affected. "Some children may not be able to go to school for weeks, maybe months," he said.

Making matters worse, the island of Espiritu Santo was rocked by twin earthquakes as residents began to clean up Cyclone Judy's damage. The first, a magnitude 6.5 earthquake, struck around 90 km from the city of Luganville at 5 a.m. on Friday, while a second 5.4 magnitude tremor was felt at 6.30 a.m. The island of 40,000 residents reported no casualties, but with communications down the situation remains unclear.

Spread across 13 principal islands, Vanuatu is in the Pacific "Ring of Fire," where tectonic plates collide, and experiences frequent seismic and volcanic activity.

As the cyclone system moved away from Vanuatu, Fiji was the next hit. Fiji's National Disaster Management Office on Monday reported flash flooding in the West, North & Central Divisions. Schools were closed on Tuesday due to continuous rain, flooding, and disruptions to public transport. Heavy rain and flood warnings remain in place for Fiji.

While the damage from the twin cyclones was reportedly not as bad as Cyclone Pam in 2015, which

devastated Vanuatu, Climate Change Minister Ralph Regenvanu has now invoked the Disaster Risk Management Act to extend a six-month state of emergency to cover the entire nation.

McGarry has previously noted that Pacific governments are increasingly quick to invoke extraordinary emergency powers “to secure themselves in positions of increasing impunity.” Vanuatu’s Disaster Risk Management Act has been used by successive governments, but the constitution requires that a state of emergency extension may only be made by parliament, and only for three months. The state of emergency has never been debated in parliament, McGarry reported.

Cyclones Judy and Kevin hit Vanuatu late in the region’s cyclone season, which stretches from November to April, but the coincidence of two such events occurring at the same time is extremely rare. They followed Cyclone Gabrielle, which hit New Zealand on February 13 and left large parts of the North Island, including the major city of Auckland, in a state of devastation after unprecedented flooding, affecting hundreds of thousands of people.

Cyclone Gabrielle also followed similarly catastrophic flooding in California in January and in Lismore, Australia last year. While individual extreme weather events cannot be traced directly to global warming, a UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report (2022) found that catastrophic flooding is becoming more likely.

The report noted that small islands such as those in the Pacific are “increasingly affected by increases in temperature, the growing impacts of tropical cyclones (TCs), storm surges, droughts, changing precipitation patterns, sea level rise (SLR), coral bleaching and invasive species.”

A 2018 communiqué by the Pacific Islands Forum declared climate change as the “single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific.” According to the UN World Risk Index, Vanuatu is more vulnerable to natural disasters than any other country on the planet. The 10 most vulnerable countries also include the Philippines, the Solomon Islands, Tonga and Papua New Guinea. Yet the populations of these countries lack basic protection against disasters.

The regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, which have maintained neo-colonial control over the region for over a century, keeping Pacific nations in a state of impoverishment and backwardness, have done nothing to mitigate the increasingly existential threats of

climate change.

Last week, Vanuatu’s United Nations representative said that 105 states, including Australia, had co-sponsored a bid to have the International Court of Justice rule on the legal obligations that states have to respond to climate change.

A General Assembly vote would seek a formal opinion from the international legal body on what “legal obligations” countries have in countering climate change. Any ruling, however, will not be binding. The initial bid did not have signatures from China or the United States, nor Indo-Pacific powers such as Indonesia and India.

As has become usual with such disastrous events, the response of the major powers is not to address the urgent needs of the population but to utilise them to boost their diplomatic and geo-strategic interests and push back against China, including despatching military hardware and personnel.

Canberra has sent the naval ship HMAS Canberra to Port Vila with more than 600 Australian Defence Force personnel on board along with supplies. A small, 12-strong Australian rapid assistance team is in the country and Australian Air Force aircraft are conducting aerial surveillance. France has meanwhile mobilised military assistance from its base in New Caledonia.

Whatever aid funding is allocated to the disaster-affected region will be a miserable pittance compared to what is required. New Zealand’s Foreign Affairs Minister Nanaia Mahuta has announced an “initial” financial contribution of just \$150,000, along with an Air Force transport plane containing some supplies.



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