

Tropical cyclone devastates Pacific island of Niue

By John Braddock
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The future of Niue, one of the world's smallest semi-independent territories, remains uncertain after Cyclone Heta swept through the southwest Pacific during the first week of January. The cyclone lashed the Tokelau Islands, Samoa and Tonga's northern islands before heading for Niue, a tropical atoll with a population of about 1,700 people, situated 2,400 kilometres northeast of New Zealand.

Niue bore the brunt of the storm, which at its height reached a strength of category five—the highest cyclone rating—with winds peaking at 300 km/hr. The damage caused is said to be the worst in living memory, exceeding Niue's previous major disasters, caused by Cyclone Ofa in February 1990 and another in 1989. With no natural protection from the sea, apart from a narrow coral reef, the atoll was at the mercy of massive waves that crashed over its 30-metre high seaward cliffs.

Alofi, the main town, was the worst hit, with widespread devastation reported to commercial and residential areas, leaving about 200 people homeless. One woman, nurse Cathy Alec, was killed as she shielded her baby son from waves that washed over her home. Her 16-month-old toddler received serious injuries. The sole hospital was destroyed, leaving the population, which has a high incidence of diabetes, in a precarious position. Its destruction—with the loss of operating theatres, x-ray facilities, maternity services and vital medicines—has placed the island under extreme pressure. Many people with medical conditions have had to be evacuated.

Homes and public buildings were completely flattened. Cars, commercial vehicles, personal belongings and basic infrastructure were lost. Fuel tanks were ruptured, water supplies almost wiped out and communication with the rest of the world cut, apart from a handful of satellite phones. Half of one of the two main resorts, Hotel Niue, ended up in the sea. An almost-completed fish processing plant disappeared. Many of the scenic coastal caves and extensive areas of the reef, the island's main tourism attractions, were destroyed.

A lack of local expertise and heavy equipment has hampered the clean-up. The islanders' crops have been wiped out, while food imports are almost prohibitively expensive. Immediate clean-up operations were delayed by the discovery of toxic asbestos roofing fragments among the rubble. Many septic tanks were washed away and raw sewage left to further

endanger public health. The island has been left tinder-dry and a fire risk. Animals that thrived in the now denuded forest cover are also hungry. Wasps, bats and rats have been reported coming into residential areas looking for food and water.

The effects of the cyclone itself, however, have been exacerbated by the indifference and colonial arrogance—both contemporary and historical—displayed by the regional powers. In the immediate wake of the disaster, the New Zealand government committed a miserly \$300,000 in emergency aid, while Australia offered \$150,000 and the United Nations a paltry \$40,000. By contrast, communities in New Zealand's East Coast region raised more than \$53,000 in the first week of a public appeal.

The level of damage and distress could have been much reduced had the ever-present threat of tropical cyclones been taken much more seriously. After the hospital was largely destroyed in the 1990 storm, New Zealand and other aid donors offered money to assist with its reconstruction but specifically refused a Niue government request to provide sufficient funds for it to be re-sited in a less dangerous position. In 1992, when the rebuilt brick and timber hospital was renovated at a cost of \$2.7 million, New Zealand contributed only \$800,000 toward the cost. Meanwhile most households and small businesses on Niue were left with no insurance cover. Insurance companies, expecting further cyclones, refused the risk.

Successive New Zealand governments carry the principal responsibility for leaving the island ill-prepared and vulnerable to such a foreseeable calamity. Niue was annexed in the late nineteenth century after it was "gifted" by Britain in recognition of New Zealand's military support in the Anglo-Boer War. After a referendum in 1974, Niue and the nearby Cook Islands won a form of independence, qualified by being in "free association with New Zealand," meaning principally that New Zealand retains responsibility for foreign affairs and defence. Niueans kept their New Zealand citizenship, where 20,000 now live.

New Zealand's legacy has been one of oppressive underdevelopment, dependency, depopulation and maladministration. The average wage is just \$NZ5,000 per year. Niue has remained heavily dependent on so-called aid programs. The total provided by New Zealand in 2003-04 was

\$8.25 million, which included \$2.5 million reserved for private sector economic initiatives.

In the 1990s, the government sector was almost halved as part of the restructuring of aid toward more market-oriented policies, purportedly to stimulate economic “self-sufficiency”. Much of what was spent in aid flowed back to New Zealand businesses in terms of manufactured and food export revenue.

The resultant unemployment significantly increased migration outflows. Many who stayed on the island were forced to cultivate agro-exports and semi-subsistence crops. However, agriculture is extremely unreliable, hampered by thin topsoil, water problems, isolation from markets and a tiny economy.

In the cyclone’s aftermath, New Zealand ruling circles began discussing whether the atoll should be left to its fate, abandoned altogether or re-annexed. The *New Zealand Herald* bluntly stated that the cyclone had “re-emphasised the island’s essential vulnerability and raised again valid questions about its viability”. Among the chief concerns were that international investors would place Niue in an “even higher risk category” and that the chances of increased business activity were “slim”. The *Herald* favoured returning Niue to direct New Zealand rule, despite the fact that most Niueans adamantly opposed this. “Self government comes at a cost,” it admonished, particularly in the provision of education, health and justice.

However, after a fleeting visit to Niue in mid-January, the Labour government’s Foreign Affairs Minister Phil Goff returned to Wellington saying Niue could “recover”. Goff emphasised that any specific New Zealand aid would be minimal and that essential to any rebuilding would be “convincing the private sector there [is] a future for them”. This would depend primarily on a prompt revival of tourism. Goff acknowledged “a big capital rebuilding program” was required, with the entire population probably needing to be relocated on higher ground. This task, he flatly declared, would be financially “beyond New Zealand on its own”.

The Niueans found themselves in an extremely insecure position. Faced with the obvious lack of enthusiasm by New Zealand and the other powers to provide a sound basis for Niue’s continued existence, many openly began considering the prospect of abandoning the island for good. Goff warned that any “new start” for the island would require more “determination”—in other words increased personal sacrifices through financial remittances—by the 20,000 Niueans residents in New Zealand, in order to sustain those remaining.

In a further turn this week, the New Zealand cabinet approved another \$5 million in aid, with Goff announcing that the government was now committed to Niue’s survival. It appears that this decision has been made to bolster New Zealand capitalism’s strategic interests. Since the late nineteenth century, New Zealand has sought to maintain a level of colonial domination over its smaller Pacific neighbours. Niue, the Cook Islands and Samoa have all been New Zealand

possessions, while Tokelau remains one.

In language he previously used to promote fears of “terrorist” activities in the Pacific, Goff said the prime purpose of the aid would be to ensure Niue was not left vulnerable to “the sort of international individuals and organisations that would otherwise seek to exploit and misuse a vulnerable small island state”. It was important to New Zealand that “those sort of exploitative groups”—in particular people smugglers, money launderers and arms traders—did not have an influence “over the future of any Pacific state”.

The New Zealand government will assert its position as cheaply as possible and with little concern for the misery and continuing poverty of the population. The \$5 million aid package falls woefully short of what is needed to replace public buildings, the hospital and houses and to relocate homes and businesses away from the sea. It includes \$1 million to be handed over to private businesses, on the basis of “a transparent and equitable means of distribution ... acceptable to New Zealand”. The full extent of the damage had yet to be assessed, but Goff admits it could run into the tens of millions of dollars.

Helen Clark’s Labour government has clearly decided to use the catastrophe to tighten its grip over Niue and strengthen its hand in the region. Its moves follow last year’s intervention by Australia, supported by New Zealand, into the Solomon Islands, where conditions of social and economic breakdown were used as the *raison d’être* for taking control over key government functions.

The immediate and long-term viability of the micro-states in the Pacific—physical, economic and political—is an important question. But the oppressed peoples of the Pacific can only freely determine their future, in unity with the working people across Australia, New Zealand and internationally, in opposition to the neo-colonial aspirations of Wellington and Canberra, the anarchy of the market and the demands of the international financial institutions.

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