

Tonga faces deepening crisis after Cyclone Gita

By Tom Peters
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More than one week after Cyclone Gita devastated the Pacific island nation of Tonga, thousands of people are still in need of shelter and basic supplies. There are growing fears of mosquito-borne dengue fever and diseases caused by contaminated water, as well as a food shortage.

The category four storm was the most destructive in Tonga for at least 60 years. The impoverished country, with a population of around 108,000, is likely to take years to recover.

Houses and other buildings were destroyed, food crops flattened and infrastructure damaged, including roads, power lines and water tanks. Parts of Tongatapu, the main island, remained flooded five days later. A Red Cross representative told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation the worst-affected area was the most-populated, low-lying eastern part of the capital, Nuku'alofa.

The total number of displaced and homeless people is not clear. According to an official estimate, 1,400 homes have been damaged or destroyed on the main island and neighbouring 'Eua. On February 17, there were still 4,521 people sheltering in evacuation centres. Fairfax Media reported that some families were also sleeping in cars.

While electricity has been restored to some parts of Tongatapu, government officials say it could be a month before all villages have power. According to the *Matangi Tonga* website, the storm damaged 80 percent of power infrastructure around Nuku'alofa.

An estimated 40 percent of schools suffered severe damage, including inundation and destroyed roofs. Some will have to be rebuilt completely.

Tongan officials said the distribution of aid has been slow. On February 16, four days after the cyclone, the Emergency Management Office told Radio NZ that

half the villages needing assistance were still waiting.

In 'Eua, with just 5,000 inhabitants, a local official, Melenaite Sisifa Fili, told Radio NZ that 30 percent of homes across six villages were completely destroyed and 75 percent damaged. Crops, including bananas and breadfruit, were flattened, with the remaining supplies only enough to last a month. Farmers in 'Eua export food to other islands throughout Tonga and internationally.

Radio NZ reported yesterday that 'Eua residents were "desperate for food and aid." At one evacuation centre, still without electricity, an evening meal consisted of a stew made with six cans of fish to feed up to 60 people. An evacuee, who was in the centre with eight family members, told reporters: "We just need food because we have lots of people here, we need help." She said they would wait for family members overseas to send supplies to help rebuild their house.

Most Tongans have no disaster insurance. Apart from tarpaulins and temporary repairs provided by aid agencies and the government, there is no promise of help to rebuild thousands of houses. A Nuku'alofa resident told Radio NZ: "We've been seeking assistance from our family overseas, if they can provide financial support to build a new house."

Cyclones and hurricanes are common throughout the Pacific, yet buildings are not constructed to withstand these natural disasters. Graham Kenna from the Emergency Management Office told Fairfax Media that Tonga's official building standards were rarely followed or enforced. "People build what they can afford, so the buildings are poor because they are poor," he said. The report noted that "the annual average income is around \$7,600 and many Tongans live by subsistence agriculture alone."

About 80 percent of the population is engaged in some form of agriculture, mostly with small plots of about two to four acres. Commercial farmer David Soaki told Newshub: “I think it will take six months to recover because we will have to replant, and it’ll take another three months for harvesting.”

According to an Asian Development Bank (ADB) report in 2016, 22.5 percent of Tongans live in poverty. Remittances sent from relatives living overseas, a major source of income, dropped sharply following the 2008 global financial crisis.

The economic impact of the cyclone has not been calculated but will undoubtedly run into hundreds of millions of dollars. Tonga’s government is already crippled with a debt of \$US207 million, equivalent to 52 percent of gross domestic product.

The regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, have feigned concern for Tongans and sent military planes with some aid supplies to the country. New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters announced that he and Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern would visit Tonga and Samoa early next month to “see first-hand the ongoing response” and discuss “what support is required for long-term recovery.”

The amounts pledged so far are grossly inadequate. As of Saturday, the New Zealand government had pledged just \$US1.65 million to Tonga and Samoa, a former NZ colony that was also affected by Cyclone Gita. The Australian government will give \$2.4 million and the ADB \$6 million. China is contributing \$550,000.

New Zealand and Australia bear primary responsibility for the poverty and lack of development throughout the Pacific. For decades their companies have profited by using Tongans as a cheap source of labour, particularly in agriculture. Now, the New Zealand government is threatening major cuts to immigration, which would have a devastating effect on the Pacific. Peters’ right-wing populist New Zealand First Party has previously scapegoated Pacific island seasonal workers, blaming them for unemployment and other social problems.

The New Zealand government visit will be used to reinforce its hegemony in the Pacific. Canberra and Wellington are both seeking to counter China’s growing economic influence in the region. In 2013, New Zealand suspended part of its tourism

development aid to Tonga in retaliation for the government’s acceptance of a gifted Chinese aircraft, which replaced a New Zealand-operated domestic service in the islands. In January, Australia’s Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, lashed out at Chinese aid and loans to the Pacific, which she claimed were funding “roads to nowhere” and “useless buildings.”

Such statements have nothing to do with concern for the welfare of Pacific islanders. Tonga and other countries are caught in a fierce geo-political rivalry, bound up with advanced preparations by US imperialism for war against China. New Zealand and Australia are close allies of the US and support its aggressive threats against both China and North Korea.

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