

UN says 24 dead in Vanuatu after Cyclone Pam

March 17 2015, by Nick Perry



Damage to houses in Port Vila, Vanuatu is seen from the air in the aftermath of Cyclone Pam Monday, March 16, 2015. Vanuatu's President Baldwin Lonsdale said Monday that the cyclone that hammered the tiny South Pacific archipelago over the weekend was a "monster" that has destroyed or damaged 90 percent of the buildings in the capital and has forced the nation to start anew. (AP Photo/Dave Hunt, Pool)

Relief workers tried desperately on Tuesday to reach Vanuatu's remote outer islands that were smashed by a monstrous cyclone, as the United Nations reported that 24 people were confirmed dead and 3,300

displaced by the storm that tore through the South Pacific archipelago.

Radio and telephone communications with hard-hit outer islands were just beginning to be restored, but remained incredibly patchy three days after what the country's president called a "monster" storm.

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said 3,300 people are sheltering in 37 evacuation centers on the main island of Efate and in the provinces of Torba and Penama.

Australian military planes that conducted aerial assessments of the outer islands found significant damage, particularly on Tanna Island, where it appears that more than 80 percent of homes and other buildings were partially or completely destroyed, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said.

"We understand that the reconnaissance imagery shows widespread devastation," Bishop said. "Not only buildings flattened—palm plantations, trees. It's quite a devastating sight."

Relief workers have been battling poor weather and communications issues for days, hampering much of their efforts to reach the islands. A break in the weather on Tuesday gave them a chance to try again, though access remained difficult. Most of the islands have no airports and those that do have only small landing strips that are tricky for large supply planes to navigate.

"There are over 80 islands that make up Vanuatu and on a good, sunny day outside of cyclone season it's difficult to get to many of them," said Colin Collett Van Rooyen, Vanuatu director for Oxfam. "Until today, the weather has been particularly cloudy, so even the surveillance flights would have had some difficulty picking up good imagery."

Teams of aid workers and government officials were planning to fly to

the southern islands, which suffered a direct hit from the storm. The teams were expected to meet with local disaster officials and conduct damage assessments, said Sebastian Rhodes Stampa, disaster coordinator for the U.N.'s humanitarian affairs office.

Some of the islands were just beginning to get their phone networks running again, and technical crews were en route to set up data and voice satellite communications. Officials hoped to restore communications to the islands within 48 hours, Stampa said.

Photos of the islands taken by crews on board Australian, New Zealand and New Caledonian military surveillance flights were being analyzed by officials in the capital, Port Vila. The information will help officials dispatch aid to the worst-hit areas, Stampa said.



Adrian Banga surveys his destroyed house in Port Vila, Vanuatu in the aftermath of Cyclone Pam, Monday, March 16, 2015. Vanuatu's President Baldwin Lonsdale said Monday that the cyclone that hammered the tiny South Pacific archipelago over the weekend was a "monster" that has destroyed or damaged 90

percent of the buildings in the capital and has forced the nation to start anew.
(AP Photo/Dave Hunt, Pool)

"Tanna has a problem with its water anyway; it's dry outside the disaster season, so there's a reasonable chance there's a lack of water there," Stampa said.

Van Rooyen spoke to another aid worker who had managed to land in Tanna.

"His description in two words is 'utter devastation,'" Van Rooyen said.

Vanuatu's president, meanwhile, was rushing back to his country, which has repeatedly warned it is already suffering devastating effects from climate change with coastal areas being washed away.

Looking weary and red-eyed, Baldwin Lonsdale told The Associated Press that Cyclone Pam destroyed or damaged 90 percent of the buildings in the capital alone. Lonsdale was interviewed on Monday in Sendai, in northeastern Japan, where he had been attending a U.N. disaster conference when the cyclone struck. He was expected to reach Vanuatu on Tuesday.

"This is a very devastating cyclone in Vanuatu. I term it as a monster, a monster," he said. "It's a setback for the government and for the people of Vanuatu. After all the development that has taken place, all this development has been wiped out."

Lonsdale said because of the communications blackout, even he could not reach his family. "We do not know if our families are safe or not. As the leader of the nation, my whole heart is for the people, the nation," he

said.

Vanuatu has a population of 267,000 people. About 47,000 people live in the capital.



Uwen Garae surveys his damaged house in Port Vila, Vanuatu in the aftermath of Cyclone Pam Monday, March 16, 2015. Vanuatu's President Baldwin Lonsdale said Monday that the cyclone that hammered the tiny South Pacific archipelago over the weekend was a "monster" that has destroyed or damaged 90 percent of the buildings in the capital and has forced the nation to start anew. (AP Photo/Dave Hunt, Pool)

Officials were struggling to determine the scale of devastation from the cyclone, which tore through the nation early Saturday, packing winds of 270 kilometers (168 miles) per hour. Bridges were down outside Port Vila, making travel by vehicle impossible even around Efate.

"The indications are showing that there will be extensive injuries if the people didn't go to higher ground (on the outer islands) and there might be a lot of fatalities," the director of Vanuatuan Prime Minister Joe Natuman's office, Benjamin Shing, told reporters in Port Vila.

The damaged airport in Port Vila has reopened, allowing some aid and relief flights to reach the country. Lonsdale said a wide range of items were needed, from tarpaulins and water containers to medical supplies and construction tools. Those on the ground pleaded for help to arrive quickly.

The city's hospital was overwhelmed with patients, and some beds were moved outside due to fears the building is no longer safe.



Vanuatu President Baldwin Lonsdale speaks during an interview in his hotel room in Sendai, Miyagi prefecture, northeastern Japan, Monday, March 16, 2015 while attending a U.N. conference on disaster risk reduction. The Pacific island

nation of Vanuatu has lost years of development progress and must "start over" following a powerful cyclone that destroyed or damaged 90 percent of the buildings on the main island of Port Vila, the country's president said Monday. (AP Photo/Koji Ueda)

"The wards have all been evacuated because of structural damage," surgeon Richard Leona told Australia's Channel 7. "We are badly needing this help. We need to get an urgent drug supply and food and also set up a mobile hospital to deal with the influx of patients coming in."

In Port Vila, smashed boats littered the harbor, and sodden piles of household belongings tangled among twisted tree branches lay where some homes once stood.



Adrian Banga surveys his destroyed house in Port Vila, Vanuatu in the aftermath

of Cyclone Pam Monday, March 16, 2015. Vanuatu's President Baldwin Lonsdale said Monday that the cyclone that hammered the tiny South Pacific archipelago over the weekend was a "monster" that has destroyed or damaged 90 percent of the buildings in the capital and has forced the nation to start anew. (AP Photo/Dave Hunt, Pool)

Many of the city's residents were already beginning the rebuilding process, said Stampa, of the U.N.

"People are chopping trees and getting on with their lives; there's a lot of laughter at night," he said. "They're remarkably resilient people."



Samuel, only his first name given, and as his father, Phillip, right, stand amongst of their destroyed home in Port Vila, Vanuatu in the aftermath of Cyclone Pam Monday, March 16, 2015. Vanuatu's President Baldwin Lonsdale said Monday that the cyclone that hammered the tiny South Pacific archipelago over the

weekend was a "monster" that has destroyed or damaged 90 percent of the buildings in the capital and has forced the nation to start anew. (AP Photo/Dave Hunt, Pool)



Samuel, only his first name given, kicks a ball through the ruins of their family home as his father, Phillip, at back, picks through the debris in Port Vila, Vanuatu in the aftermath of Cyclone Pam Monday, March 16, 2015. Vanuatu's President Baldwin Lonsdale said Monday that the cyclone that hammered the tiny South Pacific archipelago over the weekend was a "monster" that has destroyed or damaged 90 percent of the buildings in the capital and has forced the nation to start anew. (AP Photo/Dave Hunt, Pool)

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