

Death toll from Fiji cyclone hits 18 as aid sent to islands

February 22 2016, by Nick Perry



In this Sunday, Feb. 21, 2016 aerial photo supplied by the New Zealand Defense Force, debris is scattered around damaged buildings at Muamua on Vanua Blava Island in Fiji, after Cyclone Winston tore through the island nation. Fijians were finally able to venture outside Monday after authorities lifted a curfew but much of the country remained without electricity in the wake of a ferocious cyclone that left at least six people dead and destroyed hundreds of homes. (New Zealand Defense Force via AP)

The death toll from a ferocious cyclone which tore through Fiji over the

weekend has risen to 18 as authorities on Monday began to get a grasp on the scale of the disaster and deploy aid to hard-hit outer islands.

Authorities were still having trouble communicating with some islands, including places like Koro Island which suffered some of the worst damage. And more than 6,000 residents across Fiji were staying in emergency shelters after their homes were broken or swamped.

Winds from Cyclone Winston, which tore through Fiji over the weekend, reached 177 miles (285 kilometers) per hour, making it the strongest storm in the Southern Hemisphere since record-keeping began, according to the Weather Underground website.

Getting emergency supplies to the group's far-flung islands and remote communities was the government's top priority said Ewan Perrin, Fiji's permanent secretary for communications. Home to 900,000 people, Fiji has more than 100 inhabited islands.

"The logistics of getting supplies and equipment to remote communities is difficult," he said. "Some have lost their jetties and it's uncertain if airstrips are able to be landed on."

Perrin said authorities on Monday were sending a vessel to Koro Island filled with medical supplies, food and water. He said crews on the boat would build temporary shelters for those people on the island whose homes had been destroyed.



In this Sunday, Feb. 21, 2016 aerial photo supplied by the New Zealand Defense Force, debris is scattered around damaged buildings at Nakama settlement in Fiji, after Cyclone Winston tore through the island nation. Fijians were finally able to venture outside Monday after authorities lifted a curfew but much of the country remained without electricity in the wake of a ferocious cyclone that left at least six people dead and destroyed hundreds of homes. (New Zealand Defense Force via AP)

Perrin said the electricity network across Fiji remained patchy, and in some cases power had been deliberately cut to prevent further damage. He said clean water was also a challenge, and people were being asked to boil their water, treat it with chemicals or drink bottled water.

Phone communications had been rapidly restored in many areas but in other areas the damage was severe and would take longer to fix, he said.

He said Fijians were taking the disaster in stride.



Families from Wainiveidilo settlement prepare their lunch at a school used as an evacuation center in Navua, Fiji, Sunday, Feb. 21, 2016, after cyclone Winston ripped through the country. Officials in Fiji are assessing damage in the wake of the ferocious cyclone that tore through the Pacific island chain. (Jonacani Lalakobau/Fiji Times via AP)

"The people here are fairly resilient and they're accustomed to these things happening," he said. "Most are going about their business or helping clean up. There's been a very well-coordinated disaster response and we're deploying quickly."

Perrin said most of the people who died in the cyclone were hit by flying debris or were in buildings which collapsed. A handful of people had also been hospitalized with severe injuries, he said.

Fijians were finally able to venture outside Monday after authorities lifted a curfew that had been imposed on Saturday evening. A 30-day declaration of a state of natural disaster remains in effect, giving police extraordinary powers.



A tree lays across a road and power lines in Lami, Fiji, Sunday, Feb. 21, 2016, after cyclone Winston ripped through the country. Officials in Fiji are assessing damage in the wake of the ferocious cyclone that tore through the Pacific island chain. (Jonacani Lalakobau/Fiji Times via AP)

"The damage has been widespread, homes have been destroyed, many low-lying areas have flooded, and many people have been left stunned and confused about what to do," said Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama in a televised address to the nation.

He said that the police and military had been brought in to help with

rescue operations and the general cleanup, and that government agencies were working overtime to clear roads and restore power.

"This is a time of sorrow, but it will also be a time of action," Bainimarama said. "We will stand united in the face of this disaster."



A tree blocks a road after it was blown down by the encroaching cyclone Winston in Nakasi, Fiji, Saturday, Feb. 20, 2016. The Pacific island nation of Fiji is hunkering down as a formidable cyclone with winds of 300 kilometers (186 miles) per hour approaches. (Jonacani Lalakobau/Fiji Times via AP)

Tourism Minister Faiyaz Siddiq Koya said that all tourists in Fiji were safe and that there was no significant damage to the majority of hotels on the main island. Fiji is a popular tourist destination, known for its beach resorts and scuba diving.

Cyclone Winston hit Fiji on Saturday and moved westward overnight

along the northern coast of Viti Levu. Fiji's capital, Suva, located in the southern part of the main island, was not directly in the [cyclone](#)'s path and avoided the worst of its destructive power.

Authorities said that all schools would be closed for a week to allow time for the cleanup, and that three universities would be closed until further notice.

The main international airport on Viti Levu has been reopened.

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