

Monster storm strengthens in Pacific, lashing Vanuatu

April 6 2020



With Cyclone Harold strengthening, Vanuatu is still recovering from the last time a scale-topping, Category-Five system, Cyclone Pam, hit the impoverished Pacific nation in 2015, pictured

A deadly Pacific cyclone intensified as it hit Vanuatu on Monday, threatening a natural disaster that experts fear will undermine the

impoverished nation's battle to remain coronavirus-free.

Tropical Cyclone Harold, which claimed 27 lives when it swept through the Solomon Islands last week, strengthened to a scale-topping Category 5 superstorm overnight, Vanuatu's meteorology service said.

The cyclone is now packing winds of up to 235 kilometres per hour (145 miles per hour), prompting red alerts across several provinces.

It made landfall on the remote east coast of Espiritu Santo island on Monday morning and was heading directly for Vanuatu's second-largest town Luganville, which has a population of 16,500.

The slow-moving storm is expected to pass north of the capital Port Vila early Tuesday.

"For now, we don't have any reports of injury, but lots of damage," Red Cross Vanuatu secretary general Jacqueline de Gaillande told AFP.

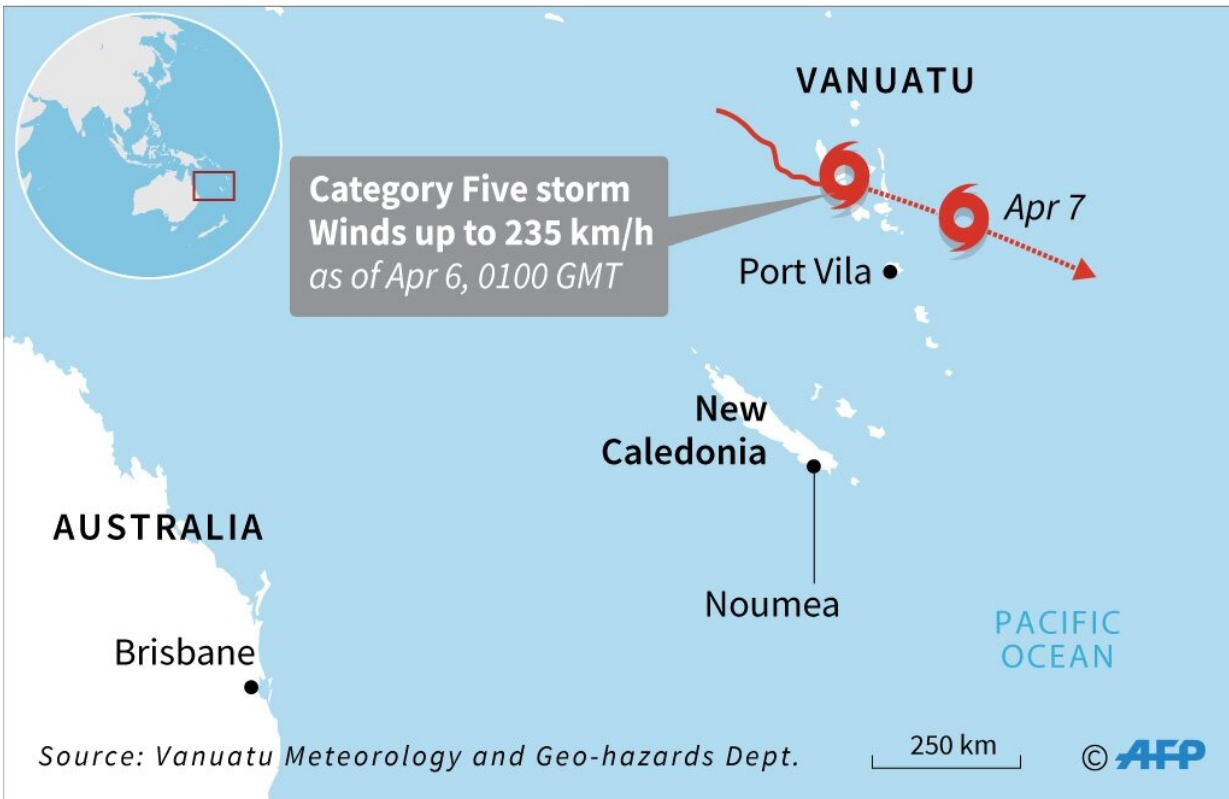
Another concern is the impact a large natural disaster could have on Vanuatu's attempts to remain one of the world's few countries without any reported COVID-19 infections.

The nation has sealed its international borders to avoid the virus but emergency measures including bans on public meetings have been temporarily suspended so people can gather in evacuation centres.

"There have been no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Vanuatu, but a significant disaster at this time could present serious logistical challenges to delivering life-saving aid," Oxfam's Vanuatu director Elizabeth Faerua said.

Tropical Cyclone Harold

Slow-moving storm forecast to pass north of Vanuatu capital Port Vila



Map locating Tropical Cyclone Harold which intensified to a category five storm as it hit Vanuatu on Monday.

Widespread destruction

A major international relief effort was needed the last time a Category 5 system, Cyclone Pam, hit Vanuatu in 2015.

If a similar operation were needed in the wake of Cyclone Harold, it would run the risk of importing the virus to a nation that lacks the health infrastructure to deal with even a mild outbreak.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern raised concerns about the cyclone and said the Kiwi military was ready to deploy if needed, even though New Zealand is on COVID-19 lockdown.

"(Harold) looks like it's coming into the Pacific with considerable force," she told reporters.

"Our defence force is at the ready, that's the role they play regardless of what's going on in New Zealand."

Cyclone Pam flattened Port Vila, killed 11 people and left a swath of destruction that the World Bank estimated wiped out almost two-thirds of Vanuatu's economic capacity.

De Gaillande said Vanuatu's government could face a balancing act between helping [cyclone](#)-devastated communities and potentially importing the virus by allowing in international aid.

"We will need international aid, but we're hoping initially it will be through funding only, so we can buy supplies and help those most in need," she said.

"We have a lot of skilled people on the ground here already (to carry our disaster operations)."

Cyclone Harold has already caused widespread damage in the Solomon Islands, where an inter-island ferry ignored weather warnings and 27 people were washed off its decks.

Solomons police said Sunday that the bodies of five passengers from the MV Taimareho had been recovered and the search would resume the next day.

"I would like to thank everyone... involved in the search for the missing 27 people so far as we try as much as possible to find the bodies so their grieving relatives can give them a proper burial," chief superintendent Richard Menapi said.

The ferry set off from Honiara for Malaita island on Thursday night, packed with more than 700 people as part of a government evacuation programme in response to the virus crisis.

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