



Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance

DISASTER CASE REPORT

Agency for
International
Development

Washington D.C.
20523

FIJI - Cyclone

Date: March 27-28, 1979 (FY 79)

Location: Eastern and southern islands, including Nayau, Lakeba, Viti Levu, and the Kandavu, Lau, and Lomaivita Island groups

No. Dead: 53

No. Affected: 20,600, including 300 injured and an estimated 15,000 homeless

Damage: 1,663 houses destroyed; damaged: 319 houses, 16 shops, 46 churches, 35 schools, 4 community halls; 90-100 percent of the root and tree crops destroyed in affected areas; large numbers of livestock lost

The Disaster

Cyclone Meli, registering winds of hurricane strength, hit 17 inhabited Fiji Islands. The storm was described as the worst in living memory, although Suva, the capital, was largely spared. Most of the damage was caused by winds; storm surges were also reported.

The Kandavu Island group, including Ono and Vatulule, was the most severely affected, with 5,000 people left homeless. In the Lau Island group there were 3,000 left homeless and some villages destroyed while almost everything on Nayau Island was destroyed, forcing the evacuation of the entire population. The copra plantations (Fiji's chief export) on the Cicia and Moala Islands were destroyed, and a church on the tiny island of Ono collapsed, killing mostly women and children who had sought shelter in the building. All water supplies in affected areas were also destroyed or contaminated, resulting in livestock losses.

An unsuccessful air and sea search was made for a South Korean fishing boat with 20 on board that had sent out a distress signal the night before Meli struck Fiji. Two American yachts were found destroyed on Kandavu Island; one person was reported killed and another missing.

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Immediate emergency needs were for tents, collapsible water tanks, clothing, blankets, cooking and eating utensils, food and milk powder to replenish emergency stocks, and cash contributions toward emergency airlift operations. However, the long-term agricultural damage was the most serious. Many root and tree crops were destroyed; replacement coconut trees require from five to 10 years to reach the fruit bearing stage.

Action Taken by the Government of Fiji (GOF)

The Prime Minister of Fiji declared a state of emergency and put a services plan into immediate action. The Emergency Services Committee (EMSEC) sent out a medical team and began immediate efforts to evacuate the wounded and distribute food and supplies to villages in the worst-hit areas. Six teams conducted assessments of the damages and, on the basis of their surveys, relief supplies coming into Fiji were allocated as needed. Emergency food rations for one month were dispatched to all affected areas. In the face of criticism that relief supplies were moving too slowly, the Prime Minister relieved the EMSEC of its responsibilities on April 5 and activated the Hurricane Relief Committee, which has responsibility for the rehabilitation/reconstruction phase of disaster relief.

Fiji Red Cross workers, university students, and civic groups spent the weekend following the storm going door-to-door in Suva collecting used clothing and blankets. The Fiji Red Cross (FRC) mobilized large numbers of volunteers for the registration and assistance of medical evacuees. Volunteers were made responsible for receiving evacuees on their arrival in Suva by ship or plane, escorting them to the hospital, and following up on their discharge. Volunteers also assisted with the local purchase, packing, and distribution of relief goods. The FRC distributed blankets, clothing, towels, tents, heavy duty polythene for temporary shelters, and milk and nutritional drinks.

Rebuilding on some islands by army construction teams was started less than a week after the storm. An assessment of water supplies was completed by the same time, and repairs were begun.

Assistance Provided by the United States Government (USG)

On April 3, 1979, the U.S. Ambassador to Fiji made a disaster determination. From his disaster relief authority he contributed \$15,000 to the GOF's relief fund for local procurement of emergency supplies and \$3,000 to the Fiji Red Cross.

A.I.D.'s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) began immediate efforts to arrange for the airlift of needed relief supplies from stockpiles in Guam and Panama. By April 6, the following were being unloaded from two C-141 transport aircraft in Suva: 300 tents, 300 tent flies, 400 cots, 600 blankets, and 2,560 water jugs. The USG paid air transport costs for a Church World Service (CWS) shipment of 6,000 lbs. of clothing and a SAWS Seventh-day Adventist World Service (SAWS) shipment of 200 tents.

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OFDA also sent a disaster relief officer to Suva to assist U.S. Embassy staff in assessing needs and coordinating U.S. assistance.

The Prime Minister of Fiji accepted an offer by the U.S. Embassy to arrange a photographic survey of the islands affected by the storm. OFDA arranged for a six-man U.S. Air Force team, which arrived in Suva on April 8. Working with the U.S. Embassy and the GOF, the team flew two photographic and survey missions. The photographs taken provided a good impression of damages to structures, trees, and villages. The team then prepared a comprehensive island-by-island and village-by-village narrative report describing the extent and magnitude of the storm damage. This report was delivered to the Prime Minister on April 12.

On May 15, 1979, the Prime Minister of Fiji wrote to President Carter, expressing his thanks for American assistance. To the American Ambassador he expressed his particular appreciation for the photographic survey and report, mentioning the speed with which the team arrived in Fiji and carried out its mission, and the usefulness of the photographic record in terms of planning rehabilitation and reconstruction operations.

Summary of USG assistance:

Ambassador's disaster relief funds.....	\$18,000
Relief supplies from Guam and Panama stockpiles.....	\$125,847
Transport costs for relief supplies.....	\$113,447
Costs incurred by OFDA disaster relief officer.....	\$2,900
Cost incurred by aerial survey team.....	\$6,977
Reimbursement of CWS (\$10,059) and SAWS (\$10,392) for air freight.....	\$20,451
TOTAL	\$284,722

Assistance Provided by U.S. Voluntary Agencies

Church World Services (CWS) - 6,000 lbs. clothing valued at \$8,465.

Seventh-day Adventist World Service (SAWS) - 200 tents valued at \$17,000

TOTAL	\$25,465
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Assistance Provided by the International Community

International Agencies

European Economic Community (EEC) - cash contribution of \$966,000 for reconstruction assistance.

South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation (SPEC) - cash contribution of \$12,000.

United Nations Disaster Relief Organization (UNDRO)-cash contribution of \$10,000; also sent a delegate.

Governments

Australia - 2,000 blankets, 10 tons canned goods, and a Hercules transport plane put at disposal of GOF; contribution through the Australian Red Cross towards purchase of 30 tents (\$5,600); contribution of supplies from defense stocks: 5,000 blankets, 850 tents, tinned food, 50 100-gallon water containers valued at \$170,455.

Canada - cash contribution of \$21,000 through the League of Red Cross Societies (LORCS).

Canada (Gov. of Brit. Columbia) - cash contribution of \$5,880.

New Zealand - sent two helicopters and two medical teams of two doctors and one nurse each; one team was assigned to the DWM hospital on Suva as backup, while the other flew from island to island for on the spot services as necessary. After the departure of the medical teams, the helicopters were used to distribute supplies to remote and inaccessible villages.

Tuvalu (Ellice Islands) - cash contribution of \$600.

United Kingdom - cash contribution of \$9,940.

Voluntary Agencies

Australian Council of Churches - clothing.

Australian Catholic Relief - cash contribution of \$22,727.

Australia Red Cross - cash contribution of \$2,800 towards purchase of 30 tents, cash contribution (\$250) for a total of \$3,050.

Belgium Red Cross - cash contribution of \$3,330.

Canada - cash contribution of \$4,200.

China - cash contribution of \$3,185.

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Egypt - cash contribution of \$450.

Finland - cash contribution of \$2,535.

Freedom from Hunger - cash contribution of \$5,682.

Germany, Federal Republic - cash contribution of \$3,755.

Japan - cash contribution of \$5,000.

League of Red Cross Societies (LORCS) - issued an international appeal for emergency shelter, clothing, and blankets on behalf of the Fiji Red Cross; sent a delegate to assist Fiji Red Cross with assessment of needs and to coordinate assistance.

Netherlands - cash contribution of \$7,410.

New Zealand - cash contribution of \$10,417; in kind contribution of \$5,268 for a total value of \$15,685.

Norway - cash contribution of \$4,950.

Pacific Conference of Churches - cash contribution of \$600.

St. Vincent de Paul - cash contribution of \$2,273.

Spain - cash contribution of \$2,975.

Sweden - cash contribution of \$5,745.

Thailand - cash contribution of \$250.

United Kingdom - cash contribution of \$6,195.

TOTAL \$1,301,472

* Please note: the figures for total U.S. voluntary agency and international assistance are an approximation. In many cases, the cash value of in kind aid is unavailable.