



Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance

# DISASTER CASE REPORT

Agency for  
International  
Development

Washington D.C.  
20523

## COOK ISLANDS - Cyclone

Date: January 2-3, 1987

Location: Rarotonga

No. Dead: 0

No. Affected: Approximately 2,000 homeless in a country population of about 18,000

Damage: Extensive damage occurred to homes, public buildings, ports, crops, and public utilities; preliminary estimates put total damage on Rarotonga at \$25,000,000.

### The Disaster

As Cyclone Raja followed a destructive course through the Fiji Island Group, the second major storm of the season in the South Pacific developed to the east. Cyclone Sally was first spotted as a tropical depression east of American Samoa on about December 24. By the time Sally reached the Cook Islands on January 2, the storm was a fully developed cyclone with wind speeds averaging 120 km per hour and gusting up to 190 km per hour. Hardest hit was the main island of Rarotonga, and especially Avarua, the country's waterfront administrative and commercial center. An unusually large storm surge, in combination with high spring tides, produced 12 m waves in the port area and carried boulders more than 100 m inland. The port looked like a "war zone" in the storm's wake, according to a police description. The harbor was completely blocked by sunken craft, and large quantities of coral debris--one to two m deep--lay strewn about the wharf area. Up to 80 percent of the buildings in Avarua were destroyed or damaged, including schools, the government tourist center, and other public structures. At least 2,000 people were left homeless in Rarotonga, but because of sufficient early warning and the timely evacuation of low-lying areas, no deaths or serious injuries were reported.

Damage to navigational aids forced the closure of the Rarotonga airport until January 4 when it reopened for daylight flights. Food and export crops were seriously damaged, and large numbers of livestock and poultry were killed or washed out to sea.

Two other islands in the Cook Islands chain, Aitutaki and Mangaia, were less seriously affected, although the entire banana crop was destroyed in Aitutaki, and several buildings lost their roofs or sustained other damage. A cargo shed and two other buildings were damaged in Mangaia.

#### Action Taken by the Government of Cook Islands (CIG)

The Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, Sir Tom Davis, described the cyclone as one of the worst natural disasters ever to hit the country. As the extent of damage became evident, he called an emergency cabinet meeting and appointed a task force to coordinate relief activities. Emergency shelters were opened for those needing such assistance, although many of the homeless found refuge with family members or friends. Food supplies were also distributed from limited resources.

Cook Islands is a self-governing territory in free association with New Zealand, which provided the major part of the relief effort. Working closely with CIG officials, New Zealand military teams conducted aerial reconnaissance and on-ground surveys. A New Zealand Air Force C-130 arrived in Rarotonga on January 5 carrying two teams of army engineers to conduct assessments; a second C-130 delivered emergency food supplies and technical support personnel. Much of the New Zealand relief effort focused on restoring electrical power and communications.

Although complete restoration of roads, harbors, and other infrastructure was expected to take several years, a major clean-up and repair operation was quickly undertaken. By January 9, the airport was again fully operational, safe water supplies had been restored, and all major roads cleared of rubble. The telephone service was operational for most areas and electricity was back to 60 percent of capacity. With New Zealand and French assistance, all public utilities were available and functioning by the end of the month.

#### Assistance Provided by the United States Government

U.S. Ambassador Paul Cleveland, resident in Wellington, New Zealand, declared on January 3 that a disaster existed in the Cook Islands as a result of the cyclone. The Embassy disaster relief officer contacted the Cook Islands Prime Minister to convey U.S. concern and to ask for suggestions on how a U.S. contribution could best be utilized. He also conferred with officials of the New Zealand government.

At Ambassador Cleveland's request, a USAID officer with SPRDO/Suva traveled to the Cook Islands to conduct a damage and needs assessment. Program Development Officer James Schill arrived in Rarotonga on January 5, accompanied by Lt. Commander Robert Phillips of the Seabees (USCINCPAC). After an extensive tour of the damaged areas and consultations with CIG officials and the New Zealand assessment teams, the U.S. team suggested that ten large tarpaulins provided to Fiji from U.S. stocks in an earlier disaster be transferred to the Cook Islands for emergency replacement of roofs on public buildings. The tarps arrived in the Cook Islands on January 11 via Air New Zealand.

The team further recommended that the \$25,000 from the Ambassador's Authority be used for the emergency repair and rehabilitation of schools and other public buildings. With CIG approval, the team arranged with USCINCPAC for a U.S. military construction team to undertake the necessary repairs. On January 27, the USAID Regional Director presented a check to the Cook Islands Prime Minister for the purchase of materials for the rehabilitation of the Titikaulaa secondary school and the Ngatangia primary school. The building supplies were procured in Wellington and shipped to Rarotonga. In addition, USAID provided a grant of \$5,000 to finance the purchase of a PEB (pre-engineered building) to serve as a replacement for the badly damaged government tourist center. The building components were transported from Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii on February 4 by a U.S. military C-141 which also carried a 15-man Air Force construction team. In a USCINCPAC disaster relief training program, the Air Force "Prime Beef" team completed work on both schools and the tourist center within seven weeks.

Summary of USG Assistance

Ambassador's authority used for school repair.....	\$25,000
Transport of tarpaulins from Fiji to the Cook Islands.....	\$1,761
Travel and administrative expenses of USAID officer (OFDA travel account).....	\$2,000
USAID grant for prefabricated building.....	\$5,000
Total OFDA.....	\$28,761
Total Other USG.....	\$5,000
	<u>TOTAL</u> <u>\$33,761</u>

Assistance Provided by U.S. Voluntary Agencies and Other Private Groups

Hawaii/Cook Islands Hurricane Relief Fund - donated 1.0 MT of clothing, linens, and canned goods, transported to the Cook Islands on a space available basis by the U.S. Air Force.

WVRO - provided seeds worth \$2,597 as part of an agricultural rehabilitation program; also, gave \$2,078 to the Cook Islands Christian Church to purchase basic household utensils for 50 of the neediest families.

TOTAL \$4,675

Assistance Provided by the International Community

International Organizations

UNDRO - gave \$50,000.

Governments

Australia - donated \$65,104.

France - provided heavy equipment (front-loaders, graders, and trucks) and a 40-man military team to assist in the clean-up operations.

Japan - sent a 4-person team of coastline conservation experts to conduct an evaluation; also donated \$100,000.

New Zealand - provided aircraft for aerial survey and 2 teams of army engineers to conduct damage assessments on Rarotonga and the outlying islands; technicians and equipment to restore electric power and communications; and emergency food supplies.

United Kingdom - contributed \$357,041.

TOTAL \$572,145