

# Mass casualties feared from Vanuatu earthquake

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At least 14 people have died and hundreds more have been injured after a magnitude 7.3 earthquake struck off Vanuatu on Tuesday. The shockwaves caused widespread damage across the South Pacific island country, about 2,600 kilometres northeast of Sydney, Australia.

According to eye-witness accounts of flattened buildings and overwhelmed hospital services, mass casualties are expected among Vanuatu's population of around 334,000. There have also been many aftershocks, including one of magnitude 6.1 early this morning.

Social media videos showed rescue efforts through the night trying to reach some people yelling under the rubble, including in a three-storey structure that collapsed onto its lower floors.

The central hospital in Port Vila, the capital, has been damaged, with tents set up outside for the influx of patients.

National broadcaster VBTC's images showed badly injured people being carried in people's arms or driven in flat-bed trucks to the hospital, where others lay in stretchers outside or sat on plastic chairs, their arms and heads wrapped in bandages.

Finau Leveni, the deputy head of delegation for the Red Cross in Fiji, said today that more than 200 people had been injured and this number was expected to increase.

The initial quake, which struck beneath the ocean about 30 kilometres west of Port Vila, triggered a tsunami warning. That led to hundreds of people in the city of 50,000 fleeing low-lying areas. The warning was later cancelled.

A seven-day state of emergency has been declared by Vanuatu's caretaker Prime Minister Charlot Salwai. It includes a curfew from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., and proclaims

that only essential services should operate.

A former British and French joint colony, made up of roughly 80 islands that stretch 1,300 kilometres, Vanuatu is in the Pacific "Ring of Fire," where tectonic plates collide. It experiences frequent seismic and volcanic activity.

The US Geological Survey said: "The area where the Australia and Pacific plates meet is among the world's most seismically active. In the century leading up to the December 17, 2024 earthquake, there were 24 earthquakes of magnitude 7 or larger within 250 kilometres of this event."

Residents said this was the most serious earthquake they had experienced. Local journalist Dan McGarry told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that some buildings were "pancaked" by the "high-frequency shake" that lasted for about 30 seconds.

"It was a violent earthquake, more violent than any that I've seen in the last 21 years that I've been living in Vanuatu," he said.

McGarry said a mass casualty triage centre was being established outside the hospital's emergency ward. "There were several people there, three that I could see who were seriously injured, lying on gurneys, a great many others... walking around with minor injuries," he said.

"There are buildings collapsed in the centre of town, so I'm quite certain that the casualty figure is going to rise." He said there were "extensive landslides" on the road joining the Port Vila wharf to the city, and there were early reports that the runway at the city's airport had been damaged.

Clement Chipokolo, World Vision's country director for Vanuatu, told the ABC that he expected the death toll to rise due to the "quite significant damage." He reported: "We observed as we drove around a number

of buildings that were flattened completely. So we imagine that there are still some people that are under those buildings.”

Chipokolo said damage to critical infrastructure such as electricity and phone lines was hampering the recovery efforts. “Lights are completely out... We don’t have water across the city, and most of our communications systems are down.”

“We anticipate that the number of deaths will continue to go up, given the number of people that are being treated as casualties.” He said Vila Central Hospital was already under strain before the quake and now “they definitely are not coping.”

Video footage posted to social media shows damage to the building hosting the US, French, UK and New Zealand diplomatic missions, with a section of the building cleaving off and flattening the first floor.

The US Embassy’s Facebook page said all staff were safe, but the building was closed until further notice. The office opened in July as part of an aggressive push by the Biden administration to expand the US presence in the South Pacific to combat China’s influence in the region.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated 116,000 people had been affected by the earthquake. Basic aid, including clean drinking water, is urgently needed.

Vanuatu is still recovering from the impact of damaging earthquakes and cyclones that affected 80 percent of the population in 2023.

The response of the region’s imperialist powers to the latest disaster has been limited, however. Australia will send two air force transport planes carrying a medical team and a search and rescue team to Vanuatu today, Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles said.

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong stated: “We are closely monitoring the situation and stand ready to provide further assistance to the people of Vanuatu as the extent of damage becomes clear... Australia and Vanuatu share a deep and enduring partnership. We are family and we will always be there in times of need.”

A New Zealand military surveillance plane was due to fly above Vanuatu today to assess the damage. New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters said his country hoped to send aid and equipment later today when the airport was cleared for use.

“With communications still badly affected as a result of the earthquake, it is going to take some time to work through with Vanuatu what assistance it needs in the days ahead,” Peters said.

French and US officials also promised to mobilise aid.

For all the language of “family,” France and the UK colonised the strategic archipelago in the 1880s and retained shared control over it, naming it the New Hebrides, until 1980. In collaboration with the US and France, Australia and New Zealand have maintained neo-colonial control over the region, keeping Pacific nations in a state of impoverishment.

Vanuatu and other Pacific states have increasingly found themselves at the centre of intensifying geo-strategic rivalry, primarily the result of the increasingly aggressive US confrontation against China.

Last year, Vanuatu was embroiled in a political crisis that led to Salwai becoming prime minister after the signing of a neo-colonial security agreement with Australia in December 2022 that allowed for a dominant Australian military presence. The agreement had been signed during a regional tour by Wong to advance the US drive to line up Pacific states behind Washington and against Beijing.



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