

Race to find survivors following devastating Vanuatu earthquake

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Rescuers in Vanuatu remain under pressure to reach trapped victims following the 7.3 magnitude earthquake that struck Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu on December 17. The shockwaves caused widespread damage in the small South Pacific country, population of 334,000 situated 2,600 kilometres northeast of Sydney.

The powerful earthquake struck 30 kilometres off the west coast of Efate, Vanuatu's main island at a depth of just 50km. It damaged many buildings and domestic dwellings in and around Port Vila. There have been numerous aftershocks—the latest a magnitude 6.1 quake which shook buildings on the country's main island at 2.30 a.m. on Sunday.

Aftershocks of at least magnitude 5 are typical of an earthquake sequence—a series of smaller quakes that follow the initial one. For an earthquake at over 7, there could be ten times as many aftershocks in the magnitude 5 range, and ten times as many again at magnitude 4, and so on. The pattern can continue for weeks to several months, or even longer.

Some 80,000 people have been directly affected. The official death toll was revised down from an initial 14 to nine, though it is expected to rise again with people still caught under rubble and landslides. Vanuatu President Nike Vurobatavu later said the number of people dead was “around 16.” Hundreds more have been injured with casualties overwhelming hospital services.

A seven-day state of emergency has been declared by caretaker Prime Minister Charlot Salwai. It includes a curfew from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. with only essential services allowed to operate. Shops and fuel stations open only at certain times and people have been rushing to get food supplies, water and fuel. On Sunday the capital's airport finally reopened allowing commercial flights to resume.

In Port Vila there are several sites where buildings are reported to be “fully pancaked,” according to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Rescuers have concentrated on two disaster areas; a four-storey building housing a supermarket, hotel and garage and a shopping

block in the CBD that crumbled into a pile of concrete.

It is unlikely they will find anyone else alive in a collapsed building which housed the US, French, UK and New Zealand diplomatic missions.

Any buildings still standing have sustained significant structural damage. The main wharf is closed due to a major landslide. Two water reservoirs supplying Port Vila were totally destroyed causing major water shortages and will require reconstruction. Telecommunications, still piecemeal and patchy, were restored two days after a near total blackout following the quake.

Locals have been working to pull people from the rubble. New Zealander Shell Piercy, a paramedic and interim chief executive of the Vanuatu emergency services told Radio NZ (RNZ) they had managed to rescue seven people out of one collapsed building but described the scene as “absolute carnage.” She said it was likely that more bodies would be found given that the quake occurred in the middle of the day in the busy city.

New Zealand engineer Nicholas Brooke said buildings that looked like “they'd sat down” suggested some had “soft stories”—an out-dated practice where the bottom floors were weaker than the upper levels, and collapsed more easily while the top stories remained intact. He too expected the death toll to rise. “It's likely to be quite a significant tragedy,” Brooke said.

World Vision Vanuatu director Clement Chipokolo told RNZ on Sunday that international assistance was making a difference, but the situation was still grave. Much of the capital remains without power and water, and some roads are still closed. “The situation is increasingly becoming dire, with potential epidemics breaking out because of lack of water,” he said.

Residents who spoke to the ABC described how their houses had “just collapsed,” leaving them homeless. Some are scared to return because of more aftershocks. With their water storage destroyed there was a “water crisis,” they said. Many are living in makeshift tents, with families stuck outside with no utilities in the searing summer heat.

The situation remains precarious for tens of thousands of children, many of whom have been separated from their families. An estimated 40,000 children need humanitarian assistance according to NGOs such as UNICEF, who say the children need shelter, food, healthcare, and access to education.

International defence and medical personnel, search and rescue teams and disaster response teams from New Zealand, Australia, France and the United Kingdom are now on the ground in Port Vila. Supplies and medical equipment for about 500 households have been sent from Australia. Military aircraft have meanwhile evacuated some 568 Australians and over 100 people to New Zealand.

The amount of aid offered by the major powers however remains extremely limited. Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong said Canberra's immediate response package was worth a pitiful \$A2 million. It includes a 64-person Disaster Assistance Response Team, a medical assistance team and nine Federal Police.

The French military have carried out emergency operations from the colony of New Caledonia, 500km away. These have included transporting emergency personnel and relief including food rations, water and IT equipment. Flights have returned to Nouméa with evacuees, including a group of shaken New Caledonian school children.

Wong emphasised that the aid and rescue missions would be conducted under the tripartite FRANZ arrangement. Signed in 1992 the agreement, involving France, Australia and New Zealand, enforces a policy of systematic coordination between the three countries' armed forces when they operate in Pacific Island countries hit by natural disasters.

Vanuatu is still recovering from the impact of damaging earthquakes and cyclones that affected 80 percent of the population in 2023. However, these events cannot be understood simply as natural disasters. Like other Pacific Islands, Vanuatu is poorly developed. According to the Asia Development Bank, 40 percent of the population lives below the poverty line of \$US1 per day and suffers from lack of access to basic services, jobs, healthcare and education.

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 backwardness and dependency. Throughout the region, the social and economic conditions imposed by the former imperialist powers, including chronic underfunding of essential infrastructure and social services, make the islands extremely vulnerable to, and unprepared for, repeated calamities.

Low-lying atolls and islands such as Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu are experiencing more extreme weather events and

hurricanes, regular flooding, coastal erosion, food insecurity and water contamination. Vanuatu this month took a case to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, seeking an advisory opinion on laws pertaining to climate change and human rights.

At the COP29 climate summit held in Baku, Ralph Regenvanu, Vanuatu's Special Envoy for Climate Change, excoriated Australia's Labor government, declaring that as the world's third largest fossil fuel exporter, it "is exporting climate destruction overseas, including to Pacific nations like Vanuatu, who experience the most devastating impacts of the climate crisis, despite contributing the least."

Disasters in the Pacific have long been used by the major powers as both military exercises and to cement their geo-strategic hold across the region. This has intensified as the drive to counter China's influence has gathered pace amid the US-led war drive. Vanuatu is a critical component in this. China is the largest external creditor to Vanuatu after a decade of infrastructure building, while Australia is its biggest aid donor.

Last August Australian officials expressed alarm after China handed over a new presidential palace, estimated to cost \$A31 million, to the Vanuatu government, joining a list of infrastructure projects funded and built by Beijing. The opening of the palace was preceded by the release of Vanuatu's foreign policy white paper reaffirming its "non-aligned" status.

According to the ABC, Canberra was concerned that China has "ploughed money into high profile projects" and suggested the palace "offered China opportunities for surveillance and intelligence gathering in Vanuatu"—but produced no evidence.



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