

Vanuatu left reeling after deadly December earthquake

John Braddock
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The deadly 7.3 earthquake that struck Vanuatu's capital Port Vila on December 17 has left the tiny Pacific nation, population 334,000, reeling. As the country moves from the search and rescue phase to recovery, the full impact of the damage is still coming to light.

According to Radio NZ (RNZ) on January 8, a new report by Vanuatu's National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) provides a "distressing picture" of the quake's impact. The official death toll sits at 14, with 265 injured. Seven people died at the collapsed Billabong Building in the capital's CBD, while the other victims died in the Port Vila area. The NDMO said 80,000 people had been directly affected with 1,473 displaced from their homes, mostly living in substandard accommodation or outdoors.

Power, water and phone services have largely been restored, though internet services are still under repair. Ongoing cyclone risks, with heavy rain and strong winds, are exacerbating damage to buildings and delaying recovery efforts.

The Vila Central Hospital remains hard hit. Clinical leader Dr Sale Vurobaravu said whole departments had to be moved out of damaged sections of the hospital and makeshift operations set up in safer parts of the building. Earlier, water and electricity were cut off for some time and blood pressure measurement and providing patients with oxygen could not be done.

Economic costs will be significant. Some businesses announced that they will not open until well into the New Year. Port Vila's CBD remains closed to the public more than two weeks after the quake.

Earthquake damage has made some buildings unsafe to occupy. Vanuatu's caretaker disaster management minister, John Salong, said structural engineers will further assess the damage, including to some of the CBD's landmark buildings. Some may need to be demolished.

Port Vila's business owners, accustomed to clean-ups that follow Vanuatu's frequent tropical cyclones, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) the aftermath of the earthquake is "different." Café owner Harly Morton said: "We have been forced shut with no information or attempted communications to help us go forward from the government."

Salong couldn't give a timeline for reopening the CBD, saying it would depend on how quickly engineers assessed damage, how fast insurance claims were processed, and how soon unsafe buildings could be demolished. "And when it comes to issues of demolitions, we don't have demolition specialists in Vanuatu," he said.

The national Recovery Operation Centre estimates its recovery plan will take two years, but Salong flatly declared it would take 10 years to fully restore Port Vila.

Medical spokesman Basil Leodoro told the ABC last month that in some of the outlying islands landslides had hit beach landing sites, roads and gardens. Some of the islands could run out of food. Water storage facilities had been damaged, increasing the risk of water-borne diseases. The mental and social health of the people would need to be carefully managed, he said. Leonardo added that in the longer term Vanuatu would "rely heavily on our partnerships and our donors" as the recovery could "take years."

The fragile and largely impoverished nation is one of the most exposed in the world, regularly subject to cascading natural disasters for which it remains poorly prepared. Spread across 13 principal islands, Vanuatu is in the Pacific's "Ring of Fire" and experiences frequent seismic and volcanic activity. It is still recovering from the impact of damaging earthquakes and cyclones that affected 80 percent of the population in 2023.

As with all such events, those cyclones exposed the consequences of mass poverty and lack of basic

infrastructure. Thousands of people were left homeless to fend for themselves. According to local journalist Dan McGarry, the impact was most evident in poorer communities, many in rural areas. “The most vulnerable are those living in impromptu housing... they’re the ones who lost their houses and had their belongings destroyed,” he said.

Preparedness for the December earthquake was virtually non-existent. New Zealand engineer Nicholas Brooke said buildings looked like “they’d sat down,” suggesting that 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.

Brooke told RNZ the quake was similar in intensity to the 2011 Christchurch earthquake that collapsed the CTV building, killing more than 100 people inside. While Vanuatu’s building code was modelled on Australian and New Zealand standards, he could not speculate on their “implementation.” New Zealand has been forced to undertake significant multi-million dollar works post-2011 to strengthen its buildings, but Vanuatu is unlikely to have the resources to do so.

The regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, have maintained neo-colonial control over the region for more than a century, keeping Pacific nations in a state of impoverishment. They have done nothing to mitigate the effects of inevitable and foreseeable disasters, including the existential threats of climate change.

Emergency search and medical teams from Australia and New Zealand went home soon after Christmas. Vanuatu will, from here, be left to its own meagre resources. Whatever aid funding may be forthcoming is a miserable pittance compared to what is required.

As has become usual with such events, the response of the major powers is not to address the urgent needs of the population but to utilise them to boost their diplomatic, economic and geo-strategic interests.

The estimated recovery cost currently stands at 29 billion vatu, about \$US235 million. Canberra’s immediate response package was worth a pitiful \$A2 million, later topped up by a token \$2.5 million for medical care and to supply water, sanitation and hygiene products.

The New Zealand government has not quantified the cost of its 10-day emergency assistance operation but has made a derisory \$NZ250,000 contribution to a Red Cross appeal. Britain, the country’s colonial ruler along with France until 1980, has given £400,000 (\$US496,880) to

UNICEF Pacific to support children affected by the quake.

The Pacific states find themselves at the centre of geo-strategic tensions, primarily the result of the increasingly aggressive US confrontation against China. In response to the crisis, Washington has pledged just \$US250,000 through the USAID program for emergency relief and recovery efforts and delivered several Starlink kits for restoring communications.

In turn, an Air China flight arrived in Port Vila on January 2 with supplies of tents, beds, solar lights, food, water purifiers and medical equipment worth VT255 million (\$US2.07 million). The Chinese Red Cross donated \$US100,000, while Beijing has pledged another \$US1 million in emergency aid. A team from the China Earthquake Administration is in Port Vila conducting safety assessments and providing scientific advice for reconstruction.

Amid the scenes of destruction, a snap general election, triggered in November, will go ahead on January 16.

Vanuatu had three prime ministers in the space of a month in 2023. Last year, the country was embroiled in a political crisis that led to Charlot Salwai becoming prime minister. It was sparked by the signing of a controversial neo-colonial security agreement with Australia in December 2022, which allowed for a dominant Australian military presence in the country.

The election outcome will usher in the fifth change in government in two years, after President Nikenike Vurobaravu dissolved the parliament in November. Facing a no-confidence vote, Salwai, currently acting as caretaker, had recommended the president dissolve parliament. Vanuatu’s top court subsequently dismissed a constitutional challenge to the dissolution, clearing the way for the poll.



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