

Vanuatu – earthquake and cyclones emergency

ETC Situation Report #2

Reporting period: 14/03/2023 to 23/03/2023

The ETC in the Pacific was activated in 2016 under the structure of the Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT) to support telecommunications preparedness in the region. The ETC in the Pacific is currently supporting the emergency response to Tropical Cyclones Judy and Kevin which hit Vanuatu on 1 and 3 March 2023, as well as two 6.6 and 5.4 magnitude earthquakes which occurred on 3 March 2023.

Highlights

- A second telecommunications specialist from WFP FITTEST arrived in Port Vila on 16 March to assess and support ICT needs after Vanuatu was hit by two tropical cyclones and an earthquake. The ETC in the Pacific is operating under Vanuatu's national cluster system in coordination with the National Disaster Management Organisation (NDMO) to support the Vanuatu government response.
- On 19 March, one of the FITTEST specialists conducted a communications assessment on the island of Tongariki in Shefa region, identified as one of the priority areas by the NDMO.
- Based on a request from the NDMO, the ETC in the Pacific is planning to support the Provincial Emergency Operations Centre on Tanna Island with satellite data connectivity services provided by WFP FITTEST.



The WFP FITTEST specialist prepares telecommunications equipment in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Photo: WFP/ETS

Situation overview

The national authorities in Vanuatu declared a state of emergency on 3 March. Tropical Cyclones Judy and Kevin — both category 4 intensity — made landfall in Vanuatu on 1 and 3 March causing widespread destruction across several of Vanuatu's islands.

The National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) of Vanuatu estimates that 251,346 people have been affected by the cyclones — about 80 per cent of the population. As of 20 March, approximately 2,300 people remained in 52 emergency evacuation shelters, down from 5,100 in 106 centres a week ago. Five priority areas have been identified, with the provinces of Shefa and Tafea designated as the first priority; the Shepherd Islands second priority, and parts of Penama and Malampa provinces third priority.

Initial food distributions, coordinated through the National Food Security and Agriculture Cluster, began in Shefa, Tafea and the Shepherd Islands on 15 March.

Telecommunications impact

The two mobile network operators (MNOs) in Vanuatu — Digicel and Vodafone — have been working to restore connectivity to all areas that were impacted by the cyclones. The WFP telecommunications specialist visited the offices of both MNOs in Port Vila on 16 March to gather information on the progress of restoration efforts. Vodafone confirmed restoring service to 90% in Port Vila, 77% in Shefa Island and 100% in Malampa. Digicel indicated that they had restored connectivity to an average of 90% across Vanuatu's urban settlements. GSM and 3G connectivity are yet to be ascertained in other islands, especially remote settlements.

Nationwide, mobile network coverage is now estimated to have been restored to 95% of the baseline level prior to the cyclones, after an initial drop of roughly 50%.¹

The [Disaster Connectivity Maps \(DCM\)](#) campaign² that was initiated on 5 March continues to track mobile network and data connectivity across the 13 islands.

FM and AM radio coverage is functional for all three radio broadcasters in all urban centres across the islands. Vanuatu's High Frequency (HF) and Very High Frequency (VHF) radio networks, which were established with support from the Government of Australia following Cyclone Harold in 2020, also remain functional following the cyclones.

ETC Activities

Coordination

The ETC in the Pacific is engaging with government stakeholders — including the Vanuatu NDMO and the Vanuatu Office of the Government Chief Information Office (OGCIO) — to assess the situation and mobilise resources to meet the ICT needs of the emergency response. The ETC is operating under the NDMO cluster system adopted in Vanuatu to support national government in both preparedness and response.

A second telecommunications specialist from WFP FITTEST arrived in Port Vila on 16 March to assist in assessing and responding to the ICT needs of the response. The ETC's Pacific preparedness operation is providing remote coordination support from Australia, while the two telecommunications specialists participate in local coordination activities on the ground in Vanuatu.

On 21 March, the ETC participated in a coordination meeting hosted by the NDMO in Port Vila.

¹ Based on open-source data from IODA, Cloudflare, and Google.

² The DCM data comes from four sources: 1) Worldwide baseline, 2) Ookla (open source for global fixed broadband and mobile network performance datasets), 3) Speedchecker (draws data anonymously from mobile phones application) and 4) Meta (parent company of Facebook and WhatsApp).

Data connectivity

On 19 March, one of the FITTEST telecommunications specialists joined an Australian Aid food distribution mission to Tongariki island to assess the status of telecommunications infrastructure. The assessment found that 3G connectivity was very slow and not all mobile networks were available in the area visited. It was confirmed that the Starlink satellite service has good coverage on the island. The ETC is planning further assessments of data connectivity needs across affected islands.

WFP FITTEST provided one Starlink connectivity terminal for the operation, activated for a period of one month. Based on a request from the Vanuatu government, the FITTEST specialist will deploy the terminal at the Tafea Provincial Emergency Operations Centre (PEOC) on Tanna Island in a three-day mission starting on 24 March. The NDMO has reported that the PEOCs in several provinces have poor to no internet connectivity, hampering communication with the NDMO's headquarters in Port Vila.

One BGAN satellite connectivity terminal was deployed from the prepositioned stock in the WFP Pacific Multi Country Office (MCO) in Fiji, with a pre-paid SIM card provided by ITU. The terminal is available in Port Vila to provide portable back-up connectivity for ETC missions.

Telephony

The WFP FITTEST telecommunications specialist configured three push-to-talk (PTT) satellite phones for the NDMO in Port Vila. Three additional satellite phones were provided by the WFP Pacific Multi-Country Office based in Fiji from their prepositioned emergency stock.

Radio

The provinces are covered by functional HF and VHF radio networks, which were installed after Tropical Cyclone Harold in 2020 with assistance from the Australian government. The Australian military currently maintains the radio networks but is preparing to hand it over to the Vanuatu government. A meeting is planned between the ETC and the Australian military focal point for the radio network to discuss equipment needs and the potential provision of telecommunications capacity building to support the handover.

The FITTEST telecommunications specialists will also conduct an assessment of the functional status of the network to ascertain any needs for equipment replacement or upgrades. The ETC is exploring the need for radio training among NDMO staff and humanitarian personnel in Vanuatu to enable them to use the existing network.

Services for communities

Evacuation centres that were set up across the country are beginning to close down as people return to their homes and other accommodation. One of the evacuation centres in Port Vila that was visited by the FITTEST telecommunications specialist for an assessment had already been vacated. The ETC is planning to visit other evacuation centres that remain occupied to identify any needs for communications services among the affected population, including for data connectivity, charging facilities, and access to information through radio broadcast.

Dashboard

See the [ETC Dashboard](#) for an overview of ETC activities and service locations.

Funding

ETC funding for the emergency response in Vanuatu will be allocated via the WFP Pacific MCO based in Fiji, which is funded for the response by USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA).

Challenges

While the NDMO reports that 100% of the arterial road network is accessible and 80% of outer island airports are operational, access to some of the islands in the most affected areas remains difficult.

The NDMO estimates that 90% of the electricity power supply has been restored in urban settlements, and few areas remain without power following the impact of the cyclones. Fuel-powered generators are in high demand and difficult to procure on the local market.

Meetings

The date of the next Global ETC Partners Teleconference on the earthquake and cyclones state of emergency response has not yet been set.

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All information related to the ETC response in Vanuatu can be found on the website: www.etcluster.org/emergency/vanuatu-earthquake-and-cyclones-judy-and-kevin

For more information or to be added or deleted from the mailing list please contact: Pacific.ETC@wfp.org