
Vanuatu disaster prompts calls for climate change action

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At least 15,000 homes are now thought to be uninhabitable after being ripped apart by winds which reached almost 300 kilometres per hour. A hospital and a medical repository where drugs are kept have also both reportedly lost their roofs.

As neighbouring countries like Australia fly aid into the country, talk is quickly turning to the role played by climate change in the disaster. The cyclone hit while Vanuatu's president, Baldwin Lonsdale, was in Sendai, Japan, with other world leaders for the UN's third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction.

Speaking in Japan, Lonsdale linked the cyclone Pam – and other recent cyclones – to climate change. Lonsdale said that in the past, the country was rarely hit by cyclones in March, but that it has become a [regular occurrence](#) for the last three years.

Islands under threat

World Bank Group vice president and special envoy for climate change [Rachel Kyte](#) agrees with Lonsdale. She says the four tropical cyclones currently threatening islands in the Indian and Pacific Oceans are "very unusual".

"It is very difficult to remember a time when you've had this frequency of such intense cyclones,"

says Kyte.

"One of the reasons for this trend is a vastly warmer Pacific Ocean. Climate scientists in the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change last year have indicated that these warmer oceans are having a profound impact on the intensity and frequency of storms and also the route that the storms are taking," she says.

The events highlight the need for the world to [take strong action on climate change](#), says Kyte, and if we care about those affected by Cyclone Pam, we must cut our emissions.

The meeting in Sendai is focussing on developing resilience to extreme weather events. Every dollar invested on technology like early warning systems, between 30 and 40 dollars can be saved, she says.

Volatile decade

"We know that we are embarking on an incredibly volatile decade, in large part because of climate change," says Kyte. "So the number of people in the world who will be increasingly in harm's way from an intensity and frequency of disasters, from floods to droughts to storms, means that this should be urgent. It is urgent that we change the way we do development."

Atmospheric scientist [David Karoly](#) from the University of Melbourne, Australia, says recent cyclones could be the result of climate change. "We have this series of very strong tropical cyclones occurring in the Pacific. Only a couple of weeks ago, we had two category five tropical cyclones making landfall on Australia on the same day – the first time that has ever happened. So there are a range of pieces of evidence that are consistent with the expectations associated with the influences of global warming."

Karoly says reducing emissions is important as it could cut the intensity of future cyclones, particularly the biggest ones.
