Beat: Travel

Cyclone Ian devastates Pacific island nation of Tonga, at least 1 dead

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USPA News - Severe tropical cyclone Ian made landfall in the Pacific island nation of Tonga on Saturday, killing at least one person and causing widespread devastation across several islands, officials said on Sunday as they began damage and casualty assessments. The cyclone passed east of the Vava`u island chain on Saturday morning before making landfall on the eastern islands of the Ha`apai group later in the day.

It was classified as a powerful category five storm on the Australian tropical cyclone intensity scale with maximum sustained winds exceeding 200 kilometers (124 miles) per hour, the equivalent of a category four hurricane. The worst affected areas appeared to be the islands of Foa, Lifuka and Uiha, three islands in the Ha`apai group where the cyclone made landfall. Sione Taumoefolau, the head of the Tonga Red Cross, said at least one person had been killed on Lifuka but added that the scale of the destruction was not yet clear. Mobile phone company Digicel said it believed at least 70 percent of homes were destroyed on the island of Lifuka, which has a population of around 3,000 people. "[Our field officer] told us that this was the worst ever damage from a cyclone [in Tongo]. Most houses are flattened, roofs are off, trees and power lines are down," the company told the Matangi Tonga website. The UN`s humanitarian agency OCHA said damage in the Vava`u island chain, however, appeared less worse than expected, although a number of buildings did sustain significant infrastructure damage. It said a wharf in the town of Neiafu was washed away and police and the military were working to clear the roads of debris, but power had already been restored. "In Ha`apai, only limited information is available at this point, but the Governor`s office continues to monitor the situation," OCHA said in a situation report. "Patients at the island`s main hospital were evacuated to a nearby school. Significant damage reported to fruit-bearing trees, such as banana and coconut. Electricity and communication remain cut." Tongan Prime Minister Siale?ataongo Tu?ivakan? declared a state of emergency for Vava`u and Ha`apai earlier on Saturday, calling the storm a "serious threat" to the kingdom. The government requested international assistance on Sunday as the devastation on the Ha`apai islands became clear. An RNZAF P3 Orion aircraft from New Zealand already arrived in Tonga on Sunday morning to assist with aerial assessments of the storm-hit islands, and the New Zealand government made an initial NZ$50,000 (U.S. $41,500) available to respond to specific requests for assistance. "Our thoughts are with the people of Tonga as they begin to come to terms with the damage caused by this cyclone," said New Zealand Foreign Affairs Minister Murray McCully, adding that his government would consider further assistance as the full extent of the disaster becomes available. Aid agencies such as Oxfam and Caritas Australia also said they were prepared to send emergency staff to Tonga. "Once the urgent needs are assessed we are expecting to help coordinate the supply of clean water and sanitation for those affected by the disaster," said Carlos Calderon, Pacific Humanitarian Manager for Oxfam New Zealand. Tropical Cyclone Ian is the first cyclone of the annual South Pacific cyclone season, which runs from November to March. Tonga, with a population of around 104,000 people, is made up of 169 islands sprinkled over the Pacific Ocean about one-third of the way from New Zealand to Hawaii. Only thirty-nine of the islands are inhabited.

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