

Thousands missing a week after Cyclone Gabrielle hits New Zealand



An aerial view shows buildings damaged by Cyclone Gabrielle in the Esk Valley near Napier on 18 February, 2023. - New Zealand is under a national state of emergency after Cyclone Gabrielle bore down on its northern coast on February 12.

Wellington, February 20 (RHC)-- At least 11 people have died and thousands are missing in New Zealand after Cyclone Gabrielle hit the North Island last week. The cyclone hit the northern part of the island on February 12 and tracked down the east coast, inflicting widespread devastation.

Prime Minister Chris Hipkins has called Gabrielle New Zealand's biggest natural disaster this century.

On Sunday, police reported two more cyclone-related deaths in hard-hit Hawke's Bay. More fatalities are possible, Hipkins told reporters in the capital, Wellington because more than 6,400 people are missing.

Lives had been "turned upside down" and recovery was a "steep mountain ahead", he said, pointing to disrupted telecommunications, shortages of freshwater and damaged roads still restricting access to some areas.

Supply chains have been disrupted, causing problems moving goods; crops had been destroyed; and 28,000 homes are still without power, Hipkins said.

Last week, he warned that recovery would take time with power not expected to be restored to some areas for weeks and the cleanup likely to take much longer than that.

After initially setting aside offers of help from the United States and other countries, Hipkins said New Zealand is now accepting them. A team from Fiji is to leave for New Zealand in the coming days to assist with its recovery, one of 12 offers of international aid received so far, Hipkins said. Twenty-seven emergency workers from Australia are assisting with relief efforts.

Teams from the Auckland Council carried out rapid building assessments on damaged homes on Sunday in the coastal areas of Muriwai and Piha, about 60 km (40 miles) west of the nation's largest city, Auckland.

Emergency authorities and the military have been dropping critical supplies from helicopters to communities stranded since the cyclone, which washed away farms, bridges and livestock and inundated homes.

Police have sent an extra 100 officers to Hawke's Bay and nearby Tairāwhiti, including to isolated areas, after reports of looting.

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