



Tough times for Winston's 'Ground Zero' areas

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Many people in Cyclone Winston's "Ground Zero" areas are struggling to make ends meet a year after the killer storm hit Fiji.

Winston was the worst natural disaster in Fiji's recorded history, killing 44 people and leaving thousands in makeshift shacks and tents.

The director of the Fiji charity FRIEND Sashi Kiran says not much has changed for many people in Ra province which took a direct hit.

She told Sally Round the government's Help for Homes programme launched last year to help Fijians rebuild has only just reached some of the hardest hit.



The roof of the Ra maternity hospital lies down in front of the building after Cyclone Winston. Photo: Alex Perrottet

TRANSCRIPT

SASHI KIRAN: The reality is that a large proportion of them are still living in tents and very temporary shelters. Some of them started receiving their Help for Home cards only about a few weeks ago so there was a round one and many of them are still waiting for those materials and there's a round two that's just happened now so people have not received the materials. We had mobilised chainsaws in some of those areas so they had cut the timber and had put debris tins together but for the last few months rain and floods have been plaguing these areas. It's miserable ... small babies, older people ... last week we were out there and people living in tents, so water just floods through and they end up sleeping on some of these wet floors because there's very little option and many of these areas, the evacuation centres, or community halls, the churches have blown away as well. Remember that in Nakorotubu areas, there was almost no building structure standing and we have been very worried pre-November to see how on earth we provide some sort of a shelter for evac centres because tents are not of much use during these rains.

SALLY ROUND: How have they coped in these really heavy rains? Where have they gone to if they needed to evacuate?

SK: Nowhere really. They have been living with the wet conditions, most of them. It has been very exhausting for the whole year for them so they're getting sort of adapted to living like this, but yes there's a lot more sickness, you'll see much more fungal growth with the wetness all the time, much more skin diseases we are seeing. We have been told that the violence has increased because there's also the sense of, you know, 'how do we even support our families?'. In some areas cohesion has grown much more because people are really trying to look out for each other.

SR: And what sort of numbers are we talking about, that are really in this bad situation where things have not moved on much at all since Winston?

SK: Actually pretty much most of the "ground zero" areas. I haven't been to Koro but the reports that I'm receiving from there are similar. We have been heavily working in Nakorotubu, that's about 15 villages. Whenever some materials have come they have built, but the community hall has been a challenge in all those villages. One village was built by a donor so they have homes. In Saivou, another area which is in the hills, the housing ... you know when the tents and the tarpaulins had been distributed until the Help for Home initiative was announced, they had not received much. In like one village, Nativi, had lost about 100 houses. And the Saivou area was badly hit by floods in December and again in January. We had been working with them trying to mobilise them in terms of growing their farms and so on and we had developed this great organic farm (inaudible) and in January all those farms were flooded and totally destroyed but when we visited them again morale was high and they were reworking on those farms and the current rains have made it really hard for them to restart. So people are coping. I mean they're resilient, they have to develop mechanisms to ensure that their families are fed and their children are in school, though we hear that quite a few families are struggling with putting children back in school.

SR: Are people poorer than they were before?

SK: I think very comfortably we can say that things have gone worse because in, say Nakorotubu areas, they were dependent on their income from yaqona and dalo and all of that was destroyed so for the last year they have been struggling with income to be able to meet some of their basic needs. And Saivou, very farm dependent, similar issues. Poverty, certainly we haven't done, of course, measurements but we are seeing people are absolutely struggling to make ends meet whether it's food, schooling needs, medical needs. Whatever little money they save, they've been running to hardware supplies in Suva.

SR: What sort of work are you planning yourselves and what else is out there for them?

SK: Well, for now we are hoping that with the second round of (Help for Home) cards people start at least getting homes back. We've given fishing boats in four villages and we're going to do two more. The income has improved because of that. Women are able to go and fish for octopus during the day and men are doing fishing at night. There are different people taking turns at it but you can see they are able to make \$200, \$300. Nakorotubu in particular do not have their land leased so there's not even lease money coming in which is the case for many other areas. It's hard in the rainy season, they can't go and fish right now, but generally when they are able to fish, that brings a steady income back in the family and they're slowly buying things to be able to rebuild and everybody's trying to prioritise education but it's been really hard. We're also hearing that children are still quite traumatised so when there's heavy rains and winds the memories come back.