

GLOBAL INFORMATION AND EARLY WARNING SYSTEM ON FOOD AND AGRICULTURE (GIEWS)

SPECIAL ALERT

No. 334

COUNTRY: Vanuatu

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Agriculture sector of Vanuatu severely damaged by tropical Cyclone Pam

Highlights

- Main food crops and agricultural export commodities badly damaged or destroyed
- Fishery infrastructure severely impacted
- Livelihoods of a large proportion of the country's population compromised by the impact of the cyclone
- International food and agriculture assistance is urgently needed to avoid deterioration of the food security situation

Tropical Cyclone Pam of category 5 struck Vanuatu in the late afternoon of 13 March 2015, affecting virtually all of the country's 65 inhabited islands and causing widespread devastation, loss of life and severe damage to the agriculture sector. The most affected areas are the provinces of Tafea and Shefa. According to early estimates by UN-OCHA, as of 18 March, approximately 3 026 people were displaced in 36 evacuation centres. Winds of about 270 km/hour, heavy rains and flooding caused extensive damage to the main food crops roots and tubers, bananas and vegetables, as well as export crops, including the main agricultural commodity coconut. Early reports indicate that the banana crop has been destroyed throughout the country, as have most coconuts and the inland cabbage plants and leafy vegetables. Cassava, taro and yams, which are the most important local food source, have been uprooted and flooded, while fruit trees have been stripped.

At household level, severe losses of stored crops and seeds, as well as small livestock, including pigs and poultry, are widely reported. Furthermore, fisheries infrastructure, such as small boats and canoes, has also been badly

damaged. Overall, the adverse impact of Cyclone Pam on the agriculture sector has severely compromised livelihoods of a large proportion of the country's population.

Government appeals for international assistance

Limited initial assessments have been conducted by the Government, in collaboration with international organizations, in four provinces of the country, namely Tafea, Shefa, Malampa and Penama. However, an overall detailed assessment of the agricultural damage has not been possible, as communication between islands continues to be severely disrupted by the destruction of road and marine transport infrastructure, as well as telephone and radio networks. The president of Vanuatu declared a state of emergency in the most affected Shefa province on 16 March and has appealed for international assistance. Meanwhile, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is urging farmers to use remaining planting materials to begin crop replanting immediately so as to ensure food supplies in the forthcoming months.



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Food security at risk

In the urban areas of Vanuatu, imported rice and wheat are the main staples, whereas in rural areas, root crops, coconut and bananas, grown year-round, are the most consumed foods. In 2014, over 74 percent of the population was living in rural areas and mostly engaged in subsistence agriculture. Around 99 percent of households on the outer islands are dependent upon consumption of own production to meet their food needs. With most of the household food stocks badly damaged or lost, farmers are expected to remain without locally produced food from about the end of March 2015 until at least mid-June when the first harvest from replanted food crops may be available, provided replanting commences immediately.

International food aid is urgently required to avoid food shortages. Agricultural assistance, in the form of vegetable seeds, planting material, farming equipment, as well as fishing gear and boats, is also of essence to facilitate fast crop replanting and resumption of fishery activities. Livestock makes a significant contribution to rural households' food security and to the national economy, with beef exported to Japan and other Pacific Island countries. Losses of animals due to the cyclone will also need to be compensated.

FAO is working with the Vanuatu Food Security and Agriculture Cluster, which is leading an integrated response by the Government and the international community, to restore agricultural production and rebuild people's livelihoods, as well as to increase the country's resilience to extreme weather events.

Rural communities highly vulnerable to natural hazards

The Republic of Vanuatu comprises a chain of some 83 islands, with a population projected at 264 000 in 2015. In recent years there has been an overall decline in the contribution of agriculture to GDP, from 26 percent in 1998 to almost 20 percent by 2009, but the importance of subsistence agriculture as a proportion of the total contribution of agriculture to the economy has been rising.

The country faces a disparate range of hazards (cyclones, earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, volcanoes) with the potential to impact on the food security of rural populations. The frequent exposure to multiple hazards, combined with poor infrastructure, poverty and low economic capacity, has resulted in Vanuatu being ranked as one of the highest risk countries in the world.

Top ten commodities availability for consumption in 2011

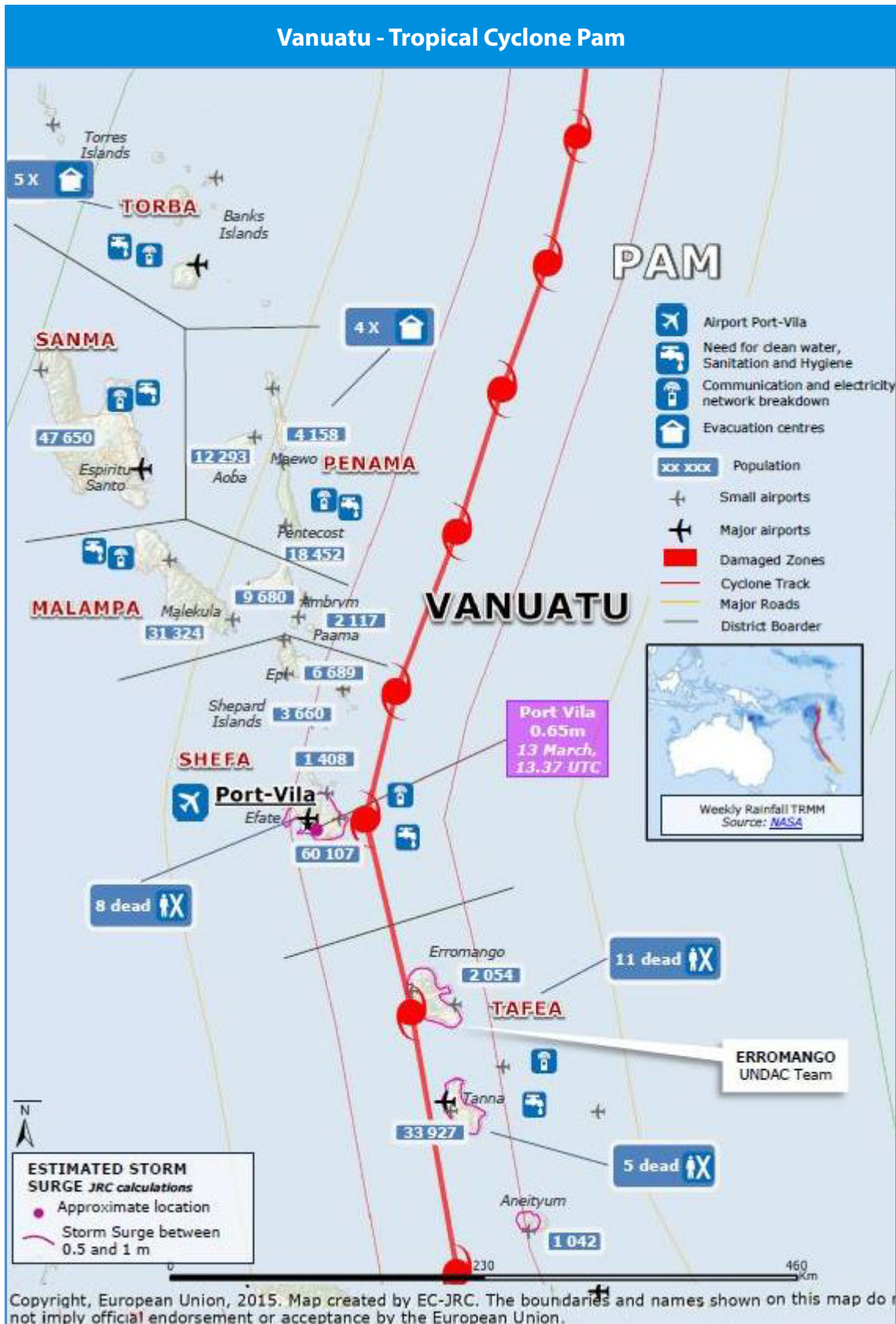
Commodity	Quantity (kcal/capita/day)
Roots, other	448
Rice (milled equivalent)	435
Coconuts, including Copra	415
Wheat and products	343
Sugar (raw equivalent)	189
Pig meat	147
Groundnuts (shelled equivalent)	95
Bananas	93
Coconut Oil	90
Potatoes and products	73

Source: FAOSTAT

Top ten commodities export quantity in 2011

Commodity	Quantity (tonnes)
Copra	13 596
Cake of Copra	6 228
Coconut (Copra) Oil	2 741
Beer of Barley	1 937
Meat Cattle Boneless (beef and veal)	1 104
Cocoa Beans	1 068
Vegetable products (fresh/dried)	679
Skins (wet salted calves)	259
Beverages (distilled alcohol)	112
Hides (wet salted cattle)	77

Source: FAOSTAT



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