

Op-ed from Australian High Commissioner, Jenny Da Rin

Australia stands with Ambae

On 23 September, the Vanuatu Meteorology and Geohazards Department raised the alert level for Ambae's Lombenben volcano from three to four. The Government subsequently evacuated over 11,000 residents from the island. When I met the people of Ambae sheltering in Luganville I heard their stories and their fears. But what was truly remarkable was their resilience and bravery in very difficult circumstances.

I met women who had travelled with their brand new babies, children who were making new friends and happily playing together and a 100 year old woman who had never before left her island but was smiling and relaxed in her temporary new home. Despite leaving their homes, their gardens and their animals, the people of Ambae were doing well, and their sing sing about home lifted all our spirits.

Vanuatu's response to the situation on Ambae has been remarkable. The decisive action by the Government, the strength of the people of Ambae, the courage of the crew on the vessels that evacuated them, the warm welcome of host communities and the outpouring of support from friends, relatives, and businesses right across the country was truly incredible. The Vanuatu Government must be commended for the speed of its response, its leadership and its hard work ensuring the communities evacuated from Ambae were safe and cared for.

This is not the first time Australia has witnessed the resilience of the Vanuatu people. In the aftermath of Tropical Cyclone Pam, the hundreds of Australian defence force and government officials who came to assist were in awe of the strength of the Vanuatu people.

Australia is very proud to support the Government with the Ambae response. At the request of the Vanuatu Government, Australia was the first country to provide support. Our initial contribution of 20.5 million vatu funded emergency supplies and evacuations. Shortly after, three Australian C-17 Globemaster aircraft laden with supplies arrived in Luganville, as did the HMAS *Choules* and HMAS *Huon*. HMAS *Choules*, with the support of an MRH-90 helicopter, helped deliver water, food, shelter and personnel to remote communities on Maewo and Pentecost.

On 14 October, our Minister of Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop, announced further funding to enable the Vanuatu Government and non-government organisations to ensure services like education and healthcare continue to reach the people of Ambae, and protect women, girls and vulnerable people. The additional funding – which brings Australia's total support to almost 258 million vatu – will help affected communities to resume more normal lives in their host communities and upon their return to Ambae.

As the Government now plans for the return of the people of Ambae to their homes, I want to personally congratulate the Vanuatu Government, SANMA and PENAMA Provincial Governments, NDMO, Vanuatu Police Force, chiefs, churches and community leaders, NGOs, Bauerfield and Pekoa airport staff, the international community (particularly our

FRANZ partners, France and New Zealand) and, most importantly, the people of Vanuatu on the response. Australia stands with the people of Vanuatu and especially Ambae, and is proud of what we are achieving by working together.