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Post Cyclone Winston and Fiji.

Cyclone Winston slammed into Fiji in late February 2016, the worst cyclone ever in the Southern Hemisphere.

After hitting the Lau Islands in Fiji's east it headed south of Suva but in the night it unexpectedly turned north, shredding Taveuni, Vanua Levu and the northern sector of Viti Levu, Fiji's main island.

46 people were killed, many more injured, Tens of thousands of homes and buildings severely damaged or destroyed. It is estimated 500,000 people are living in substandard housing.

Months later, many buildings have been repaired but hospitals, schools and houses still need to be rebuilt. A scary thought with the next cyclone season about to begin.

I am involved in three main projects in Fiji. Two of these were in the cyclone's path.

I have been visiting **Ra Maternity Hospital** at Navunibutu, at the head of Viti Levu Bay, past Rakiraki, for almost 20 years. It serves the remote north coast and interior of Fiji's main island.

Owned by the Catholic Diocese of Suva, it is a small hospital run by nurses. They have successfully reduced maternal and infant mortality rates.

In the past 18 years Rotary has assisted by sending medical and general goods, repairing a section of roof after Cyclone Evan, providing two water tanks, repainting the hospital interior and much more. Apart from the internal paint, the rest of these improvements were removed by Winston!

I have lived through several cyclones but was SHOCKED by what I saw at the hospital.

Cyclone or not, life goes on.

Babies will arrive and the nurses must be ready to deliver them. Midwives from across Fiji arrived for their annual meeting.

Opposite the hospital is St Francis Xavier College – a high school serving the same area. It is located below the hilltop St Francis Xavier Church which was also damaged.

Last October, I went with a friend from the Rotary Club of Parkes to install 22 computers at **St Francis Xavier College** assisted by a young computer whiz!

The computers got wet during the cyclone but were opened and dried and have been carefully stowed until electricity is restored to the area.

A trip into the interior showed more Cyclone Winston damage.

Just about every house on the way was de-roofed. On the way there we drove through what had been a pine forest. Trees were snapped in half and all needles were stripped.

I have never seen this after a cyclone before.

Mums and Dads sheltered under their houses during the cyclone, in the middle of the night.

They were very, very cold and very, very scared. It took a long time to get assistance to them and they still need lots of repairs and rebuilds to their homes.

Damage is everywhere – individual homes and infrastructure. It will take years to rebuild.

Now, and this is the VERY IMPORTANT PART.

The houses that are being rebuilt are pretty well being rebuilt in the same way. Which means they will blow away in the next cyclone.

Since 1983 Rotarian Peter Drysdale has been building cyclone resistant houses – no-one can say cyclone proof because no-one knows what the next, direct-hit cyclone will do to a building. More than 1000 of these homes have been built and not one has been lost despite dozens of cyclones hitting the Western Division of Fiji.

More than 200 of these houses are at **Koroipita** (pronounced koro-ee-Peter – meaning village of Peter), nestled in the hills five minutes' drive north of Lautoka. A haven for more than 1000 people, this village grew out of the Fiji Rotahomes project and until recently was under the auspices of the Rotary Club of Lautoka but it now a separate entity, the Model Town Charitable Trust. RAWCS was very involved and PDG 9830 Lew Pretorius was on the governance team, representing Rotary.

Hundreds of volunteers have worked on this project, the majority Rotarians.

This is my third project – I have assisted with house and community building at Koroipita and raised funds for the children's education. I am not so much involved at the moment but I do have a long term commitment to the village as I know many of the residents there and always visit when I return to Fiji.

New houses being built should be built to this standard. Even if just a few houses in each village could be upgraded to this standard then there would be some surety for people in future cyclones.

WHAT PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT POST-WINSTON FIJI.

1. The majority of tourists who visit Fiji will not see any areas that were affected by Cyclone Winston. The majority of tourists go to Denerau, off Nadi, down to the Coral Coast or to the Mamanuca Islands – off Nadi. Only one or two resorts off Nadi suffered any damage.
So people return from Fiji believing everything is OK! It isn't!
2. After a cyclone (and at other times) people want to send goods to Fiji. Immediately after Winston Air Fiji was sending every plane full of goods. But there is a hierarchy....food and baby goods first, medical items etc etc. Books, electrical goods are NOT needed at this stage.
3. More importantly, money is needed to buy goods locally, to boost local businesses. Also what is available locally is usually better suited to what people need.
4. If sending goods at any stage you need to have someone on the other side who is prepared to accept the goods, a letter from them saying they will accept them, money to pay duty on the items (there was a short period after the cyclone where duty was not charged but normally it must be paid), someone to collect the goods from the freight yard and someone to deliver the goods to people/places where they are most needed.
5. I am always happy to assist should people have ideas on something they wish to do re Fiji.
6. Maybe we should have a Rotary educational to Fiji – so people can see beyond the resorts.