

TRR ACKNOWLEDGES TELECOMMUNICATIONS SERVICE PROVIDERS CYCLONE PAM RESTORATION EFFORTS AS A JOB WELL DONE

In Vanuatu's history, Cyclone Pam was the most devastating cyclone ever to hit Vanuatu (and indeed the Southern Hemisphere). Studies following the devastation of Cyclone Pam have found some pertinent reasons for the very low death toll.

"It is evident that one of the three main reasons for the low death toll during Cyclone Pam is that the telecom service providers, in particular mobile operators, were very proactive and assistive in sending many free cyclone warning text messages before and during the cyclone to all their customers until category 5 Cyclone Pam struck the affected Islands with its full force.

Provision of these telecommunications services during the buildup and severity of Cyclone Pam is seen to be one main reason for the low loss of life. The extremely speedy restoration of telephone systems, in particular mobile networks, within some days/weeks after Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu was a wonderful result and one that was critical to and welcomed by the citizens of Vanuatu, and the restoration and recovery efforts", said the Telecommunications Regulator, Mr. Ronald Box.

Mr. Box informed that in the few days before Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu, the two mobile operators, Digicel and TVL, together with the lead and support of OGCIO working with TRR, co-operated to develop a plan as to how critical telecommunications infrastructure could be protected, and how coordinated recovery efforts during and after Cyclone Pam had passed through Vanuatu could be optimized. Organizations critical to service restoration including OGCIO, TRR, TVL, Digicel, Unelco, Vanuatu helicopters and National Disaster Management Office (NDMO), formed the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster Group (ETC) and drew up a plan to guide preparations for the Cyclone. TRR gave its full backing and support to this initiative. As part of the plan, TVL and Digicel offered the use of their networks, free of charge, for the Government through NDMO to disseminate cyclone information and warnings to end users throughout Vanuatu.

Given the waiving of any cost incurred by Digicel and TVL in the public interest and safety, TRR sincerely thanks these two operators for deciding to freely provide this critical SMS warning service. The two operators also took measures to free up their networks to avoid congestion and ensure families remained connected as circumstances best permitted during and after the cyclone.

The ETC also identified key contact points, availability of helicopters, power grid shut down procedures in case of severe cyclone damage, and the sharing of resources to enable sending engineers to Provinces prior to the Cyclone.

However, despite this preparation, the strength of Cyclone Pam was so strong and severe, that significant damage occurred; including to the mobile networks in the country. Although communications were disrupted, the sector was not out of business or reach for long as service providers rallied together to assist the Government in promptly restoring communications throughout much of Vanuatu. With the invaluable support of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and other international

agencies/countries, more than 20 satellite phones were brought into the country to ensure communication was facilitated in areas that had no mobile coverage at all due to the Cyclone's damage.

Digicel, TVL and Telsat, plus other smaller telecommunication service providers, worked around the clock immediately after the cyclone to rebuild damaged infrastructure and to bring back communication services to the people of Vanuatu as soon as possible. For a short period post Cyclone Pam, and due to damaged infrastructure, voice, SMS and internet services had been badly affected and some customers were unable to contact their families or relatives.

TRR is also generally aware of the substantial losses that each operator has encountered, and has requested a damage assessment report from each of them to be provided to TRR indicating the overall cost of damages and losses in order to ascertain what assistance may be required.

It took operators less than two weeks to bring services back to most parts of the country, despite suffering from the damages to their infrastructure. Service providers also provided special deals (promotions) to ensure families and friends could contact each other. The cooperation between service providers and NDMO in supporting OGCIO and the Government to restore network infrastructure and telecommunications services around Vanuatu is highly commendable.

As the regulatory agency of the Government responsible for the telecommunications sector, TRR wishes to acknowledge and thank all operators and telecom service providers for their hard work, commitment and dedication in rebuilding their network infrastructure and for service restoration. TRR also acknowledges the NDMO and supporting services to telecommunications such as Unelco for its excellent restoration work. It is a remarkable effort and outcome by these sectors.

TRR wishes to congratulate and thank OGCIO for its outstanding coordination efforts and the leading role it played pre and post Cyclone Pam. TRR also congratulates and thanks the Government for its role played and its initiatives in the restoration efforts. TRR additionally thanks international organizations and donor partners for their invaluable support to and for the telecoms sector, and the nation as a whole, as we work together to rebuild Vanuatu for all sectors and ongoing activities.