Key messages

- The Pacific region is frequently hit by natural disasters such as cyclones, floods, droughts and earthquakes. Pacific countries rank among the highest in the world in terms of numbers of casualties and people affected. The European Commission provides humanitarian assistance to the region both in terms of disaster preparedness and emergency relief when major disasters strike.

- In response to the impact of the 2015-2016 El Niño system in several Pacific countries, the European Commission’s Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) has released funds for drought relief in the hardest-hit country, Papua New Guinea.

- Following Tropical Cyclone Winston that swept across Fiji in late February 2016, the Commission made €1 million available to provide emergency assistance to the most vulnerable families. In addition, through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, essential relief items were also delivered to impacted communities.

- Promoting and enabling active participation of both women and men in training, planning and decision-making for Disaster Risk Reduction* and emergency response is crucial for reducing vulnerability to natural disasters in the Pacific. It is also important to develop links with development programmes and climate change action to increase community resilience to natural disasters.
The Pacific is one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world in terms of the recurrence, severity and scope of hazards, with high exposure to cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, tidal surges, landslides, drought, forest fires and volcanic eruptions, as well as epidemics. This is compounded by environmental degradation and the negative impact of climate change. Most recently in February 2016, large parts of Fiji were struck by Tropical Cyclone Winston, claiming 43 lives and affecting over 350,000 people.

Lack of economic diversity, remoteness from major trade and commercial centres, and strong gender inequalities, are factors which characterise many of the Pacific island nations and exacerbate their vulnerability to disasters. With a total population of some 10 million spread across a vast area, the death toll and number of people affected by natural disasters can appear rather low in standard disaster statistics, but the Pacific countries rank among the highest in casualties and people affected per number of inhabitants.

The complex El Niño phenomenon continued to affect the Pacific in 2016. It usually affects precipitation levels, leading to different impacts in different places: exceptional rainfall, cyclones, frost and drought. Its effects, however, vary from one occurrence to the next, making it extremely difficult to make predictions. The European commission closely monitors any unusual weather patterns because of its potential impact on people and their livelihood.

**The European Union’s humanitarian response**

**Emergency assistance**

On 20 February 2016, Tropical Cyclone Winston made landfall northeast of the Fijian capital of Suva as a Category 5 cyclone. Considered one of the most powerful storms to hit the south Pacific region, the tropical system triggered strong winds, heavy downpours and flash floods that left 18,000 houses and vast tracts of farmland devastated. In response to the event, the Commission has allocated €1 million to support the provision of shelter, food assistance and access to clean water and sanitation to the most vulnerable communities. The funds are also used to help revitalise agricultural activities, which will eventually restore the livelihoods of the impacted families.

Papua New Guinea was impacted by the El Niño climatic phenomenon from mid-2015 to 2016, causing the affected areas to experience less than average rainfall and a series of frost events. The prolonged anomalous weather pattern has resulted in water shortages and crop damage in a number of localities, particularly in the Highland provinces. Last year the Commission made over €1.26 million available to enable its partners to provide relief and build resilience amongst the most vulnerable communities. Overall, a total of 75,000 individuals benefited from this aid, which included health and nutrition support, as well as access to clean water and the provision of water and hygiene kits. Farmers also benefited from training on drought resilient agricultural methods. As the dry spell has continued into mid-2016, affecting the food security of close to 1.5 million people nationwide, a further €2 million has been released to support a food assistance initiative by the World Food Programme (WFP). The aid focuses on meeting urgent food needs of 180,000 people in drought-affected areas.

In March 2015, when Super Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu with full force, the Commission pledged funds for immediate relief to the most vulnerable families. Two experts were deployed to participate in the needs assessments along with the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team. To enable inhabitants in remote islands to re-establish contact with the rest of the country and ensure coordination amongst actors involved in the humanitarian response, Telecoms Sans Frontières (TSF) was funded. In the following weeks, the Commission also funded the French Red Cross to distribute basic shelter tool kits, tarpaulins and hygiene kits, while in areas deprived of ground water, roofs were fitted for rain water harvesting. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) supported the construction efforts with the provision of toolkits and technical training on safer construction techniques at community level.

The European Commission regularly responds to smaller or localized disasters through its Small Scale Response mechanism, for example after the large scale floods which displaced some 9,000
people in April 2014 in the capital of the Solomon Islands, Honiara, and other areas of Guadalcanal. The European Commission allocated close to €173 000 in humanitarian funding to provide sanitation facilities and deliver hygiene kits to the most vulnerable people. Environmental expertise was also deployed to the islands through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism* as part of a joint EU/UN mission to help assess the risks triggered by the heavy rains.

In 2013, the European Commission identified the widespread sexual and gender-based violence in Papua New Guinea as a "forgotten crisis". It allocated €1.5 million to support protection and care systems for victims of violence in the period 2014-2015. Médecins sans Frontières-Holland used these funds to provide emergency first aid and psychological counselling, as well as safe haven accommodation, to the victims and their families. Perpetrators also received psychological counselling.

**Reducing the impact of natural disasters**

For the period 2015-2016, the Disaster Preparedness programme (DIPECHO)* for the Pacific region has an allocated funding of €2.5 million. The programme funds community-based disaster preparedness actions, linkages between the community, village, province, region and national levels and standardisation of Disaster Risk Reduction tools, joint work and coordination of governmental and non-governmental organisations, and peer-to-peer learning and experience sharing.

### Examples of humanitarian projects in the Pacific region

Cyclone Pam, which hit Vanuatu in March 2015, caused widespread damage on communication infrastructures in the Pacific island nation. As part of the European Commission's immediate response, a contract was signed with NGO Télécoms Sans Frontières (TSF), specialized in deploying and operating emergency communication equipment. The project enabled the different actors to speak and exchange data across the disaster zone pending the restoration of normal services. It also brought invaluable psychological relief to many families who, without any communication means, had remained without news of loved ones dispersed on different island for days. © TSF

In 2015-2016, Vanuatu, training on disaster response is being provided to volunteers in the northern far-flung village of Be-am, on Gaua Island, to enhance their response capacity in times of disasters, when external support is not immediately available due to the location’s remoteness. Villagers are also provided with basic tools for disaster preparedness and response, such as radios with a cyclone tracking map, hoes, tarpaulins and axes. Residents can also now fill in an assessment form quickly and adequately after a disaster and submit it to the provincial administration for consolidation or follow up. © EU/ECHO

In Papua New Guinea, family, sexual and gender based violence is widespread. According to research, nearly two-thirds of women have experienced beatings and some form of sexual violence. A third of the men interviewed experienced sexual abuse as children. The EU’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO) has recognised this violence as a “Forgotten Crisis” and supported Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Holland in a project aimed at establishing Family Support Centres (FSC) where abused women and children can receive life-saving medical treatment and counselling. © EU/ECHO