

Powerful cyclone spares Fiji's most heavily populated areas

By

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NADI, Fiji (AP) - A powerful cyclone packing wind gusts up to 154 mph pounded small islands in northern Fiji on Friday, but missed heavily populated areas of the South Pacific nation, officials said.

Cyclone Daman remained a Category 4 storm early today, forecaster Alipate Waqaicelua said, "but we've got to be thankful that it missed the two larger islands of Fiji."

Officials had feared many of the flimsy thatched homes of farmers and fishermen would be blown away.

"While the cyclone is weakening (slowly), it's still packing a very strong punch," Waqaicelua said from Fiji's Nadi weather centre.

He said Cikobia, a small northern island with a population of at least 100 people, was among the hardest hit. Fiji disaster management officials said they lost all contact with Cikobia as Daman hit the island with winds at its center gusting to 154 mph.

Disaster office spokesman Jioji Satakala said heavy rain was falling and people in the main villages had all sought refuge in reinforced houses when contact was lost.

People in the Lomaiviti island group and on Vanua Levu - Fiji's second main island - had escaped serious damage and there had been no reports of injuries, he added.

As Daman sideswiped the Labasa area of northern Vanua Levu, landslides sparked by heavy rain closed some highways, flooding hit low-lying areas, and gusting winds destroyed trees, disaster office spokesman Pajiliai Dobui said.

Waqaicelua said the cyclone "is still Category 4 and is still an intense system" but had "missed Vanua Levu because of the change of track."

About 90,000 people live on Fiji's three main island groups of Lau, Lomaiviti and Vanua Levu, many of them living on subsistence-level fishing and farming. The cyclone was on a track that would take it toward open water, about 25 miles northeast of Fiji's northern Lau islands group later today, Waqaicelua said. "I hope it stays on that track."

Fiji has been hit by 13 tropical cyclones in the past decade - the worst in 2003 when the lower-intensity Cyclone Ami hammered the Labasa region of Vanua Levu and killed 17 people.

The country's worst death toll in recent decades was 70 killed when the moderately strong Cyclone Lottie sank two ships off western Fiji in 1973.

Tropical storms are common in the South Pacific from November to April and range from category 1 to category 5. The most powerful can pack sustained winds of 130 mph.