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Second cyclone threatens Pacific islands

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The clean-up has begun on Aitutaki in the Cook Islands group after a cyclone caused widespread damage yesterday, while other islands in the Pacific prepare as a second cyclone builds.

Tropical cyclone Pat, which blasted the island of Aitutaki yesterday morning, has now been downgraded to a tropical storm and has moved into open waters.

Up to 90 percent of houses Aitutaki were reportedly severely damaged.

But tropical cyclone Rene has been gathering strength and could threaten Tonga, Samoa and Fiji.

The New Zealand Red Cross said it was assisting with preparations on those islands.

International operations manager Andrew McKie, said it was "issuing warnings, identifying people who might need special assistance to evacuate (eg older people or those with disabilities), securing infrastructure and making sure all satellite phones are charged and working".

The Red Cross today sent further relief items such as tarpaulins to Aitutaki where its volunteers were assessing damage and identifying the needs of residents and holidaymakers, he said.

It continued to raise funds for the Cook Islands.

Emergency management director Charles Carlson said cyclone Pat had pretty much affected everyone in Aitutaki and some houses had been totally destroyed, leaving people living in community centres or churches.

"Maybe just a couple of houses that's still standing and in good shape," he told Radio New Zealand.

Trees had fallen "all over the place" and concrete power poles had been flattened by the winds.

"Some of the houses are just basically folded in, just like bulldozers just run through it."

Cook Islands Tourism New Zealand manager Chris Ingram said Aitutaki had a significant reliance on tourism.

"Visitors to the island ensure jobs for locals and while it is a blessing the damage isn't worse, cyclone Pat has left its mark and these are trying times for our people."

Many resorts had sustained only minor structural damage, as they had been built to withstand cyclones, and remained fully operational, but some would take a few days to weeks to get back to normal.

"The vegetation and trees that have blown down have caused a mess particularly to pools, the beach and areas used for dining and relaxing around the resorts.

The clean-up is a priority as the sooner the resorts are back to the paradise images Aitutaki is known for, the tourists will be back." Anyone travelling to Aitutaki should contact their travel agent for further information, Mr Ingram said.

Rarotonga was operating as normal.

Cyclone conditions on Wednesday morning killed three young men in Tokelau, New Zealand's northernmost territory which lies 500km north of Apia, Samoa.

Seven men were flipped out of a barge into stormy seas off the coast of the island Atafu, stuff.co.nz reported.

The four other men managed swam to safety.

All 1200 people on Tokelau are New Zealand citizens.