

LOCAL AIRLINE PLAYS VITAL ROLE IN CYCLONE AFTERMATH

Rarotonga, 16th February 2010 - When Cyclone Pat threatened the Southern Cook Islands last Wednesday Air Rarotonga dispatched two aircraft carrying a complement of emergency personnel to Mauke to shelter over in case the storm moved southward over Rarotonga.

By 1pm in the afternoon as soon as the cyclonic winds began to abate at Aitutaki, the aircraft landed with Police and other personnel to begin the critical first response to the emergency. As soon as the cyclone moved to the west of Rarotonga aircraft began evacuating visitors and others who urgently needed transportation to Rarotonga.

By mid afternoon a further flight departed from Rarotonga carrying more Police and Emergency Centre personnel to the Island.

Between Wednesday afternoon and Saturday night a total of 330 people had been evacuated and 350 emergency workers and volunteers airlifted into Aitutaki along with seven tonnes of urgent cargo including countless generators, chainsaws, water pumps, tarpaulins and other essential equipment.

The airline is often the first responder to arrive in these emergency situations because of its daily outer-island operations and proximity said Air Rarotonga Managing Director Ewan Smith. "That was the case with Cyclone Martin and now Cyclone Pat. We were able to get in quickly moving essential personnel and supplies to tide things over until a Hercules could arrive with the heavy equipment and specialists".

Aside from dealing with the public emergency, the airlines Aitutaki based staff had to contend with their own badly damaged homes and distressed families. Relieving staff from Rarotonga have been travelling to Aitutaki each day to handle ground operations while the Company assists Aitutaki staff to repair their houses. "We need to help our local Aitutaki staff and their families get back to normal as quickly as possible"

Smith says that from his experience of past disasters, the response from local authorities and NGOs to Cyclone Pat has been good. "In hindsight there are always some things that might have been done differently or better but on the whole the emergency response to Cyclone Pat has been good. In particular the organization and rapid response of Cook Islands Red Cross has been a standout. There is a growing pool of skilled local knowledge and logistical ability to deal with emergency situations, and it showed this time. There are a lot of dedicated local people out there in Aitutaki doing a lot of good work"



Meanwhile the airline is looking at ways to assist the Aitutaki community through the longer term rebuilding phase. "One of the first things we will do is support Aitutaki tourism operators in their efforts to get the flow of visitors back up and their businesses running smoothly". Last Monday saw the first group of day trippers once again enjoying Aitutaki's pristine lagoon.

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