Australia is continuing its biggest ever emergency food lift into drought-stricken Papua New Guinea. It is by far the biggest and most complex relief operation ever attempted by the Australian aid program and the first time AusAID has managed such a long-running crisis response.

Rains have now fallen over much of Papua New Guinea, bringing great joy and relief. The worst of the drought is over. Emergency work will continue at least until April, with Australia continuing to deliver food to remaining pockets of severe hunger. However AusAID is now focussing more on helping the country recover from what could well have been a major humanitarian disaster on Australia’s doorstop.

THE SCALE OF THE DISASTER

At the height of Papua New Guinea’s most severe drought for 100 years, more than a million people faced food and water shortages. By the end of 1997 more than 40 per cent of PNG’s rural population were estimated to have little or no food left and were surviving on what they could forage in the forests or on food aid.

In some places, little or no rain had fallen since January 1997. Almost 50,000 people had insufficient drinking water, and much of what they had was already contaminated.

The drought not only threatened this season’s food crops. Severe frosts, associated with the El Nino climatic effect which caused the drought, and fires destroyed much of the planting material needed for next season. Other plants which would ordinarily have been set aside for replanting were eaten in desperation. Only very small amounts of planting material survived.

Although few deaths have been attributed directly to the drought, months without sufficient food and drinking water have taken their toll on villagers. People are suffering from diarrhoea as a result of eating bush leaves and drinking contaminated water. Others have severe malaria.

The low death toll is largely due to the resilience and initiative of the people of Papua New Guinea, who have sought other ways to feed their families: foraging in the forest, trading, activating extended family networks. It is also thanks to...

Food was still arriving for the villagers of Erume in January. The village has been relying on AusAID food aid since October last year.
In October, AusAID, with the help of the Australian Defence Force, began a massive relief operation. Fixed wing aircraft and helicopters are being used to carry thousands of tonnes of food to drought-stricken and isolated areas. In December alone, Australia provided 596 tonnes of food to villagers in remote areas.

Villagers receive eight kilograms of rice, two kilograms of flour and one litre of oil per person, per month. AusAID closely monitors the distribution, ensuring that food is distributed fairly, showing distribution committees how to keep records, reporting back serious problems with health or water and making sure that the places being reached are those most in need.

The substantial rains that have now fallen across much of PNG have allowed thousands of people to replant their crops. As self-sufficiency is re-established, communities which have enough food to survive, and enough planting material to fully re-establish their gardens, will no longer receive Australian food aid.

Estimates of the number of people Australia needed to feed in March dropped to 45,000 and it is anticipated that ADF food relief flights will not be necessary after April.

**AFTER THE RAINS: FROM RELIEF TO RECOVERY**

From the beginning, AusAID has had its eye not only on the immediate need for food relief in PNG, but on ways to enable the people to recover self-sufficiency as soon as possible.

Both the PNG government and AusAID are determined to discourage dependency on aid – the so-called “handout mentality” – so they have looked for ways to get people eating food grown in their own gardens as soon as possible.

Such initiatives are a major part of Australia’s $1 million post-drought rehabilitation program.

AusAID, working with the PNG Department of Agriculture and Livestock and the Fresh Produce Development Company, is providing up to 400 tonnes of plants and seeds of fast-growing food crops to boost local replanting efforts in areas that have had enough rain to plant.

The varieties chosen are seed potatoes, maize and assorted vegetables. These crops are already familiar to villagers and grow much faster than the traditional sweet potato and sago crops. They will reduce the length of time people are forced to rely on handouts. Beans, for example, are ready in just 45 days, compared with sweet potato, which takes up to 12 months to mature in highland areas.

Many of the villages getting these materials are still in the grip of hunger despite the rain, and there is a risk that seed potatoes will be eaten instead of planted. (The
potatoes for planting are impregnated with pesticides that ensure their growth, but which may be dangerous if eaten.)

To deal with this problem, officers from the Department of Agriculture and Livestock and the Fresh Produce Development Company accompany each delivery of planting materials to explain to the people its use. They also provide written agricultural extension material where appropriate.

Provincial radio stations are also broadcasting messages explaining the purpose of the planting material, and the best farming methods to ensure their success. The most important message for farmers is not to abandon planting of their traditional crops. These new crops are intended to supplement, not replace, traditional foods.

The crisis has heightened farmers’ awareness of their vulnerability to drought, making this a good moment to introduce more sustainable farming methods. Some effective traditional irrigation methods already exist in some parts of PNG, and AusAID is investigating ways to develop more village-level initiatives for crop irrigation.

**FROM CRISIS TO DEVELOPMENT: THE LONG-TERM BENEFITS**

Much of the assistance Australia is providing will have long-term development benefits, reducing PNG’s vulnerability to drought and ensuring it is better prepared to deal with other emergencies.

The experience gained in responding to this large-scale disaster will enable the PNG authorities to be better prepared for any future crises. The technical advice provided to government departments will, in many cases, help improve their day-to-day efficiency. As well, many of the drought relief and rehabilitation activities complement work AusAID is already doing or planning in PNG.

**Water**

The impact of the drought has been magnified by rural Papua New Guineans’ reliance on rainfall for water. Had other sources been available, such as wells or irrigation, the drought would not have affected so many people, so quickly. In the capital Port Moresby, for instance, people, businesses and government authorities have all experienced daily power cuts due to low water levels in the dam producing hydro-electricity.
AusAID has sponsored two water experts to provide coordination in the water sector. Responsibility for water is divided between a number of agencies and it remains an important task to ensure that the relevant agencies take appropriate actions in their areas of responsibility.

The eventual aim is to muster government and donor resources to identify and implement appropriate water solutions. These projects when completed will provide more secure access to water for many villages in rural PNG. More crops can be grown and health and hygiene will improve. Women, whose traditional role is to fetch water, will especially benefit from water sources closer to home.

**Health**

AusAID was already looking at a proposal to send a disease control expert to PNG when the Department of Health requested emergency assistance in the drought.

AusAID promptly sent an epidemiologist to help the Department prevent, identify and respond to outbreaks of drought-related disease. Little information was available on the communicable diseases being caused by the lack of food and water, so the first task was to visit a selection of aid posts and provincial health authorities to gather data.

Then, together with the Department of Health, the epidemiologist designed rapid response procedures to ensure speedy and efficient prevention and treatment measures are put into place if an outbreak of disease occurs.

The techniques learned by local medical staff will be helpful in many other situations, including in the aftermath of other disasters. With several months’ experience in the field, the epidemiologist himself will also help define the tasks for a longer-term disease control adviser to the PNG Department of Health.

**Disaster relief**

Unfortunately, natural disasters are not uncommon in PNG. Volcanoes, cyclones and other such disasters are a feature of the country’s geography and weather.

AusAID has invested a great deal in helping PNG’s NDES develop its capacity to respond effectively to emergencies.

AusAID provided expert advice and equipment to help the NDES coordinate the current drought relief efforts. The experience gained in coordinating such a massive relief effort will help PNG to be better prepared to respond to future disasters.

FLYING FOOD TO SOME OF THE MOST REMOTE PLACES ON EARTH

Delivering urgently needed food to some of the most remote locations in Papua New Guinea was a real logistical challenge for the government of PNG and AusAID.

PNG’s geography is rugged and inhospitable. High mountains and great rivers separate villages. Its people are diverse and often isolated. More than 10 per cent of the population is accessible only by air.

AusAID, with the Australian and PNG Defence Forces, had to overcome many obstacles to get the relief to these places. Airstrips had to be checked to make sure they were safe for heavy-lift aircraft to land. Helicopters had to fly up steep valleys to land at villages more than 2,000 metres above sea level.

In the first months, smoke from forest fires limited visibility and made flying extra dangerous. Ironically, so did the rain when it came. Violent thunderstorms and lightning strikes seriously hamper air operations, so while food is still needed it is now even more difficult to deliver. But such challenges have not stopped AusAID and ADF from getting emergency aid through to those most in need.