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MEDIA RELEASE

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Help, not heels and handbags in humanitarian crises

A new report has found that more than 70 shipping containers packed with high heels, handbags, heavy blankets, canned food and other unrequested goods were sent to Vanuatu after Cyclone Pam in 2015.

Ten months after the cyclone, 18 containers remained uncollected, accumulating nearly \$2 million in storage fees, while more than half of the canned food items had expired.

The Red Cross report – examining ways to reduce the unrequested donation of goods – also found that in the aftermath of Cyclone Winston, Fiji received 133 containers, enough to fill 33 Olympic swimming pools.

Australians are being asked not to send unrequested goods to countries affected by a disaster amid findings which show that many of the items become landfill.

Joanna Pradela, Head of Policy and Advocacy for the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), said: “The generosity of the Australian public is unwavering. When a disaster strikes, people’s first instinct is to help in any way possible. But sometimes well-meaning actions do more harm than good.

“Sending unrequested goods has unintended consequences, like diverting relief workers and adding costs to an already stretched emergency response. Cash donations allow aid and humanitarian organisations to direct supplies to those most in need of assistance and easily adapt to people’s needs as the situation unfolds.”

Steve Ray, Disaster and Crisis Response Manager at Australian Red Cross, said the mismatch between what is needed and what is sent, hinders disaster relief efforts.

“People who donate goods often send whatever they have to hand. After Cyclone Winston, sports gear, miscellaneous school books, chainsaws, carpets and woolly jumpers clogged up Fiji’s airports and docks.

“Customs officials and relief agencies then have to sort, catalogue and assess these items, which takes time away from helping the people most affected. When you factor in shipping fees, storage and distribution, the costs far exceeds their value.

“When people give cash, aid agencies can help in the most effective way: whether by providing tarpaulins in bulk or giving families cash to buy what they need from local markets,” Mr Ray said.

ACFID is asking people to show their generosity with cash donations, rather than goods.

Joanna Pradela said: “Generosity and chipping-in to give others a fair-go is part of the Australian tradition. But instead of donating household items, we would encourage people to sell them online or at garage sales and local markets, and donate the proceeds. Alternatively, op-shops associated with international aid charities will gratefully accept good-quality clothes and household items.”

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[The ACFID website](#) includes up-to-date lists of trusted aid and humanitarian organisations working in disaster affected countries.

Joanna Pradela continued: “Members of the public can be assured that their support is meeting identified needs. The standards by which ACFID members make appeals for donations for humanitarian crises are set by a Code of Conduct. This includes a responsibility to provide clear information to donors on the emergency situation and the work they are doing with affected communities.”

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Further Information

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ACFID appeals page: <https://acfid.asn.au/our-focus/emergency-response>

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