



# MAJOR AIRLINES SUSPEND VANUATU FLIGHTS OVER AIRPORT RUNWAY CONCERNS

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Vanuatu's tourism industry is again under threat after three major airlines suspended flights to the archipelago because of the capital's deteriorating runway.

Over the past week Qantas, Air New Zealand and Virgin Australia have suspended flights and code shares to Port Vila over concerns of the condition of the Bauerfield International Airport strip.

Virgin Australia said it would have one flight on Saturday for passengers returning to their port of origin.

A number of Pacific airlines are continuing to fly, including Air Vanuatu, which said it was meeting daily with Civil Aviation Authority Vanuatu and airport management. All flights are continuing to Espiritu Santo – another island in the archipelago.

Safety measures in Port Vila, including daily sweeping of the runway, were being monitored and captains had the final say on whether it was up to scratch before taking off, it said.

The damaged airstrip – it is said to be crumbling – is not due to cyclone damage, but rather degradation over time and government delays in upgrading.

The flight cancellations are another setback for the country, which was devastated by the powerful category-five cyclone Pam last year.

Tourism generally accounts for about 40% of Vanuatu's GDP and about a third of its permanent workforce, but faced a significant downturn following the destructive cyclone.

The International Monetary Fund forecast an economic decline of about 2% for 2015 following the cyclone, due to its impact on tourism and agriculture, in contrast to the 3.5% growth predicted before the storm.

Much of the country's population rely on subsistence farming of coconut and kava, but after cyclone Pam it will take up to 10 years for these crops to recover.

Despite the poor outlook, tourist numbers were increasing at the end of last year, said chair of the Vanuatu Hotels and Resorts Association, Bryan Death.

"In the latter part of 2015 they were pretty much back to where they were the previous year, and that was an encouraging sign, but that's now on hold," Death told the Guardian.

"[Hotel cancellations] are of great concern to our operators here because our bookings were starting to pick up."

Death said the government and national bank of Vanuatu were in discussions over a zero-interest loan to conduct emergency repairs to the runway, estimated to cost US\$1m, which would allow for flights to resume in six to eight weeks.

"One of the things we're trying to say to people is if you have bookings coming into Vanuatu in our high season and [the] period after easter onwards, don't necessarily go and cancel plans straight away."

Vanuatu's political instability has also contributed to the current crisis. A national election, called after a corruption scandal engulfed the government and saw 14 MPs, including a former prime minister, jailed, was held last week.

Death said there was nowhere else to apportion blame for the runway than with the government.

"If the politicians had done their job last year, the runway would have been upgraded and completed last year," he said.

"There was a funding approval in March last year that sat on the table until the government decided very recently they were going to cancel the World Bank agreement and go to an Asian offer ... Now the crisis has happened the government has done a full backflip and are supporting the World Bank agreement."

The World Bank's Pacific Islands director, Franz Drees-Gross, told the ABC the offer remained on the table for Vanuatu.

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