

Frequently asked questions - Vanuatu earthquake

21 December 2024

On Tuesday 17 December 2024, a magnitude 7.3 earthquake struck Vanuatu at 12:53pm AEDT, 37 km off the coast of its capital, Port Vila.

We extend our solidarity and condolences to anyone impacted by this earthquake, including all ni-Vanuatu Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme workers, stakeholders and citizens currently in Australia.

Is there any more information about what is happening in Vanuatu after the earthquake?

Citizens of Vanuatu in Australia wanting information about the situation in Vanuatu or who need support to contact family or friends in Vanuatu are encouraged to call the Vanuatu High Commission Infoline on (02 6282 9931).

Country liaison officers from Vanuatu have set up a Facebook page called [PALM scheme Notis Pod](#) and are posting updates on the situation in Vanuatu there.

The Vanuatu Government National Disaster Management office is also posting updates on its [official Facebook page](#).

The Australian Government is posting regular updates on the [Vanuatu Smartraveller website](#).

PALM scheme employers or other stakeholders who are in contact with ni-Vanuatu workers are encouraged to share the above information and links with them.

Is there any information available about flights from Australia to Vanuatu?

Flights from Australia to Port Vila International Airport in Vanuatu were impacted by the earthquake and a number of ni-Vanuatu PALM scheme workers who were due to return home on 17 December 2024 or immediately afterwards had their travel disrupted.

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations is working directly with airlines and PALM scheme employers to support the repatriation of a number of these workers.

On Saturday 21 December 2024, Airports Vanuatu confirmed that Port Vila International Airport would be reopening for commercial flights on Sunday 22 December 2024.

PALM scheme employers are encouraged to support ni-Vanuatu PALM scheme workers to confirm their return travel arrangements as airlines have started to reschedule flights.

Information from Airports Vanuatu describes ongoing intermittent disruptions to utilities, communications and services in Vanuatu. Incoming passengers should expect extended processing times at airport terminals as the recovery efforts continue.

How can ni-Vanuatu PALM scheme workers and citizens in Australia call home?

Telstra is offering free voice calls to Vanuatu for all Telstra customers in Australia. If workers have a prepaid, post-paid or home phone service, they can now call home for free.

Free phone calls will be available from 19 December 2024 until 11.59pm AEDT on 8 January 2025.

PALM scheme employers and other stakeholders are encouraged to share this information with ni-Vanuatu workers.

For more information, including how to call, please visit the Telstra website: [We're offering free voice calls to Vanuatu](#).

How do employers and workers report they have been impacted by this event?

For critical and urgent issues, please call the PALM scheme support service line on (1800 51 51 31). For non-critical matters, you should lodge an enquiry through PALMIS.

Who should explain the Vanuatu earthquake situation to impacted workers?

In the first instance PALM scheme employers should ensure PALM scheme workers have information regarding the earthquake and impacts and available sources of information to remain up to date on this situation.

If employers need assistance to explain this situation to workers, please contact the relevant country liaison officer (CLO) or the PALM scheme support service line (1800 51 51 31). CLO contact details are available on the PALM scheme website: (www.palmscheme.gov.au/contact).

Is there any wider support for impacted ni-Vanuatu citizens in Australia?

The following supports may be able to assist workers and others impacted by the earthquake, including those experiencing distress:

Australian Red Cross - Emergencies and Disasters

- Website: [Emergencies and disasters | Australian Red Cross](#)
- Phone: Customer Care Team (1800 733 276)

Lifeline Australia

- Website: [Lifeline Australia - 13 11 14 - Crisis Support](#)
- 24/7 phone: (13 11 14)

1800 Respect

- Website: Home | 1800RESPECT
- 24/7 phone: (1800 737 732)

How should employers support workers who have been impacted by the earthquake?

PALM scheme employers must continue to support the ongoing safety, welfare and wellbeing of impacted PALM scheme workers.

- Employers must notify the department of any workers who were unable to return home as planned via the PALMIS approved employer portal, including workers' details, current situation and contingency arrangements.
- Employers must assist workers to engage with the relevant airline about changes to their travel arrangements. Workers should not depart their placements until their return flight details are confirmed.
- Employers must ensure arrangements are in place for suitable accommodation and food for any impacted workers. If possible, work placement arrangements should be extended until return flight arrangements are finalised.
- The department is working with relevant employers to ensure supports are available to workers who were already in transit at the time of the earthquake.
- Employers must familiarise themselves with their workers' visa status and support workers to apply for new visas if required and if possible.
- The department will support the extension of placements if required and where work is available.
- Employers who have ni-Vanuatu workers due to arrive soon or in the new year are also encouraged to start to think about contingency planning in case of disruptions to mobilisations due to the earthquake.

Does the Vanuatu earthquake situation mean employers are not responsible for ensuring workers return home?

No. When a PALM scheme worker ceases their employment the employer must continue to meet obligations under the deed and guidelines until the worker departs Australia to return to their home country. This means that the employer is responsible for ensuring that the worker can return to their home country regardless of unforeseen circumstances.

Can workers continue to work after the expiry of their recruitment plan until they can return home?

PALM scheme employers must support impacted workers to return home as soon as reasonably possible.

If workers need to remain in Australia for a short time after their placement has ended the department will support the extension of placements if required and where work is available.

Please note the implications for visas outlined below.

What if a worker still has time before their 403 visa expires?

PALM scheme employers are encouraged to continue employing and supporting PALM scheme workers whose visa duration has not yet expired. The 403 visa remains valid in this circumstance.

Question: ‘My visa is still valid for more than 7 days?’

If you hold a valid visa you will remain lawful.

Question: ‘My visa is about to expire in the next 7 days?’

If you hold a valid visa you will remain lawful. If your visa is due to expire in the next 7 days, please see the Department of Home Affairs website: (immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/what-we-do/status-resolution-service/overview).

Question: ‘My visa has expired?’

If you are unable to depart and your visa has expired, please see the Department of Home Affairs website: (immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/visa-about-to-expire). PALM scheme employers are encouraged to contact the Department of Home Affairs via the online Status Resolution Service to discuss support options available for PALM scheme workers whose repatriation plans have been impacted by the Vanuatu earthquake.

Employers are required to continue to support the ongoing safety, welfare and wellbeing of workers until such time as they can return home.

If workers need to move to access ongoing work because they cannot get home, who is responsible for the cost?

The PALM scheme employer is responsible for the cost of relocating the impacted worker.

If a worker needs to be relocated, do I need written approval from the department to change the approved recruitment?

No. Under normal circumstances, changes to approved recruitments or offer of employments must not be made unless the department has given written approval. However, where the circumstances that require the relocation of workers is urgent and unforeseen, only verbal approval is required.

Will employers be required to submit a new recruitment plan in the event they have ongoing work available for workers while they are awaiting repatriation?

The department's priority is the welfare and wellbeing of PALM scheme workers and employers. We will assess and approve contingencies on a case-by-case basis. Employers are asked to engage closely with their relationship managers and remain flexible as the situation evolves.

Do workers need a new offer of employment if they continue to work for a short period of time after expiry of their recruitment plan?

The department does not need to pre-approve a new offer of employment. PALM scheme employers are asked to communicate clearly and transparently in writing to impacted workers if extending their offer of employment. Generally, employment should be on the same terms as under the worker's previous placement (if this is possible). If you need help with a variation letter, please contact your relationship manager.

What should an employer do if a worker's placement has ended and they have work available for them - but it will not meet the minimum hours requirement?

The department acknowledges the current situation is exceptional and encourages employers to keep workers engaged and employed wherever possible, even if this is for reduced hours until they can depart Australia. The department will take a flexible approach to managing minimum hours given these exceptional circumstances.

Do employers have to provide the \$200 net pay each week while workers cannot return home?

If a PALM scheme worker remains employed, the employer needs to continue to ensure the worker receives a minimum of \$200 each week. This is to ensure the worker has enough money to meet their basic needs until they can return home. Note that debt cannot be carried over to a new placement if workers subsequently return to Australia.

The department acknowledges feedback from employers that workers may have sufficient means to meet their needs and not wish to take on further debts. Employers must retain written evidence (e.g. an email from a worker or a file note of a conversation with a worker) where workers elect not to accept a cash advance for a top-up of wages.

Do employers have to cover the cost of worker's accommodation and transport if they offer fewer than 20 hours of work in a week?

The department acknowledges the current situation is exceptional and encourages employers to keep workers engaged and employed wherever possible, even if this is for reduced hours until they can depart Australia. The department will take a flexible approach to managing deductions safeguards given these exceptional circumstances. Employers are encouraged to engage with their relationship manager.

If the employer needs to move workers to new accommodation, does the accommodation move require prior approval by the department?

The department's priority is the welfare and wellbeing of PALM scheme workers and employers. We will assess and provide conditional approval that allows workers to move accommodation on a case-by-case basis. Employers are asked to engage closely with their relationship managers and remain flexible as the situation evolves.

I am an employer with workers from Vanuatu due to arrive in Australia. Do I need to seek reapproval from the department if mobilisation dates are forced to change?

The PALM scheme employer guidelines provide that you must notify us and seek our approval if the variation to the arrival or departure date has changed or is likely to change by more than 2 weeks of the dates specified. The department acknowledges the current situation is exceptional and requests that you advise us by creating an enquiry case in PALMIS of any changes to mobilisation dates, but it will not require our pre-approval.