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FEATURE ARTICLE

Being a Savvy Consumer During Cyclone Season

Strong winds, heavy rain and thunderstorms. YES – the cyclone season is once again here and the onus is on consumers to ensure they remain protected in terms of safety and spending. Fiji is no stranger to cyclones and while the majority of Fijians were fortunate enough to remain unscathed from Tropical Cyclone Mal earlier this week, this is by no means a pass for Fijians to become lax—we might not be as lucky next time around.

What do the experts say?

Fiji has been hit by 14 cyclones in the last 7 years alone and due to the increasing impacts of climate change, this is only expected to get even worse. Additionally, these weather events are likely to become more intense causing damage on a larger scale. According to the Fiji Meteorological Service, two to three tropical cyclones are likely to pass through Fiji's Exclusive Economic Zone this cyclone season and one to two severe tropical cyclones are likely to affect Fiji during this period.

However, it is not just strong winds that Fijians will have to keep an eye out for. As seen previously, mass flooding and even sea flooding is commonly associated with these superstorms that have had a very drastic impact on human life. The average loss due to cyclones and flooding to our GDP are estimated to be \$500 million annually, with more severe Tropical Cyclone's such as TC Winston costing over \$2 billion.

Consumer activity at the cyclone's horizon

Once a cyclone forms in or near Fiji, heightened consumer activity typically ensues in the market. Consumers rush to stock up on essential disaster items, including batteries, candles, torches, bottled water, hurricane lanterns and lamps, chargers, ropes, building materials, generators, tarpaulins, tents, carpentry tools, and matches. Regrettably, it has been observed that many traders seek to exploit this panic, taking advantage of consumers willing to pay inflated prices through engaging in price gouging.

This exploitative behavior by traders has manifested itself consistently during previous natural disasters. Significantly, such behavior is not confined to the pre-disaster period. Immediately following a natural disaster, certain traders may attempt to retail damaged stock and even increase prices on essential goods such as food and building materials. This pattern was evident in 2017 after floods caused by Tropical Cyclones Josie and Keni, and more recently following

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Cyclones Ana and Herald. Surveys conducted previously, along with an analysis of complaints by the Council, revealed that some unscrupulous traders were capitalizing on the distress and suffering of consumers.

Consumer advice

Pre-Disaster Period

1. Stock up early

It is not practical to shop around for the best deals just when the announcement of a possible cyclone is made because you may end up paying high prices for certain goods. Additionally, one may not be able to get certain goods because of high demand. One way to beat this is to stock disaster essential items at the start of the cyclone season instead of waiting to purchase in the last minute.

2. Check your expiry dates

Consumers must also check expiry dates when shopping for disaster essential items. Look for items that have a longer shelf life, this way you are able to keep it for a longer period of time.

3. Know what you will be facing

If you live-in low-lying areas or on more exposed hilly areas, you should know what effects a cyclone can have on you and your family. If the area you reside in is flood prone, try to stock up on waterproof torches and canned food. These will be useful if you need to evacuate suddenly. Prepare your emergency kit in such a way that can be easily taken to evacuation centres and does not get damaged.

4. Look out for traders limiting sale

It has been noted during past cyclones that certain traders tend to place restrictions on the quantity of goods one can purchase. For instance, during one of the cyclones, a trader was limiting sale of hurricane lanterns to one per customer. This is an illegal practice, unless written approval is provided to the trader by the competition regulator. So, consumers should be on the lookout for this practice. It is noteworthy that limiting sale can also occur post cyclone.

Post Disaster Period

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1. Frozen products

During cyclones, consumers can expect power outages to affect stores and supermarkets. As a result, large amounts of frozen goods in supermarket freezers will defrost and may spoil. Some traders may still try to retail these goods hence, consumers should take care to carefully inspect any frozen food that they purchase after a natural disaster.

2. Beware of flood damaged goods

Carefully inspect all items to ensure they have not been damaged in floods which is a common occurrence during cyclones. If the packaging is discolored, or looks damaged, it is likely that it may have been wet by floodwaters. Before you purchase any electrical items, ask the store attendants to test them to ensure that they work.

3. Look out for conditional selling

Immediately after cyclones, the Council often discovers traders engaging in conditional selling. For instance, telling consumers they can only buy bread if they purchase butter with it. Conditional selling is illegal and if consumers face this issue, they must immediately contact the Council.

4. Be wary when dealing with hardware companies

As consumers try to rebuild their damaged homes after cyclones, the demand for hardware materials such as timber gets relatively high. During such instances, consumers have reported cases whereby certain hardware traders took thousands of dollars as deposit but failed to supply materials. Therefore, consumers must ensure to only deal with reputable traders and should first confirm if the products are in stock before making payments.

General tips on preparing for a cyclone

While you cannot control when or where a cyclone will hit, the best way to minimize potential damage is to be prepared. Here are some easy steps you can take to be prepared for a cyclone:

Make a plan

If evacuation is necessary, turn off all utilities such as electricity and follow community disaster preparedness plans. Select a common meeting place or single point-of-contact for all family members. If you have pets, have a plan for their evacuation as well.

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Install storm shutters

Protect windows, doors and skylights with appropriate shutters or impact-resistant glass. You can nail pieces of plywood to window frames as last-minute protection

Power up

Fill your car's petrol tank, charge your mobile phone, test your generator and have plenty of fuel ready in case of power outages

Prep an emergency kit

Gather torches, a portable radio, extra batteries, non-perishable food, bottled water, cash, blankets, clothing and toiletries.

Identify a shelter room

This enclosed area should be on the first floor, in the central part of the house with no windows. Avoid all unprotected windows and doors until the storm passed.

Move your cars

Move cars to higher ground or park them in your garage against the garage doors. Do not park under trees, power lines or in low-lying areas.

We are here for you!

The Council continues to undertake frequent market surveillance pre, and post cyclone periods to ensure traders do not engage in unethical practices. Traders must also understand that charging fair prices for goods helps to improve their public image as a fair trader and guarantees them repeat business.

If consumers come across traders that engage in unethical practices pre or post cyclones, they should contact the council via the National Consumer Helpline on toll free number 155. Consumers can also email their complaints to complaints@consumersfiji.org.

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