

Cyclones and volcano hamper hydro project

BY JANENE CAREY

DORRIGO'S Peter Lynch, managing director of Pelena Energy, has returned from an eventful month in Vanuatu that featured three cyclones, one volcanic eruption and 20 days of rain.

It's hardly surprising that his work on Stage Two of the Talise Hydroelectric Project on the island of Maewo didn't quite go according to plan.

Stage One in 2014 involved the construction of the 75-kilowatt generation plant, a run-of-river micro hydro system that Pelena Energy designed.

The goal for Stage Two was to lay 6km of high voltage cable underground from the generator at the Talise River valley to the coast, bringing power to four villages:

Tam, Talise, Narowason and Nasawa.

Each of the villages will have a step-down transformer that takes the voltage from 11,000 volts to the standard 240 volts supplied to houses, schools, clinics, businesses, and churches.

However, drenching rain, fierce winds, high seas and falling ash meant they only got 1.5km done, despite having 200 members of the community leading their labour to unload equipment from boats, dig long trenches by hand, and haul cable through the jungle.

The volcano that erupted on March 24 is on the island of Ambae, famous as the inspiration for James Michener's paradise Bali Hai.

Standing on the beach at



Local helpers carrying HV cable from the village of Tam to step up

Maewo, 17km across the water, Peter watched as the lava shot a kilometre above the top of the mountain.

No one was injured by the eruption but major devastation has been occurring from ash and acid rain falling on Ambae and other islands.

Places that the villagers and their animals rely on for sustenance have been destroyed, water supplies have been contaminated and tracts of formerly green jungle have turned monochromatic grey.

Technical officers taking care of the hydro system on Maewo have been checking that the corrosive ash is not damaging the equipment.

Peter said these young locals were carefully selected



Volcanic activity as seen from Talise, Maewo Island. The volcano is spewing so much ash that the island of Ambae, home to 11,000 people, is becoming uninhabitable.

and trained for the role of technical officer.

"We don't target highly formally educated people," he said. "We target people who have demonstrated a willingness and enthusiasm to stay living in their rural

area, in their villages. These are the types of people where we've really been able to blossom both their careers and our business."

Peter plans to return to Vanuatu in June, when the wet season is over.

As well as finishing the cable laying, Pelena and its community taskforce will be putting lights and power points in two boarding schools and a medical clinic as part of Stage Two.

The Vanuatu government is seeking funding for Stage Three of the project, which will supply electricity to houses in the villages.

Vanuatu is one of the most remote, dispersed nations in the world, and in 2014, when its rural electrification project launched, three-quarters of its population was living without access to electricity.

The government has set a target of 90 per cent access by 2020, with 65 per cent power generation from renewable energy.