

Australia: Cyclone Larry leaves thousands homeless and destroys livelihoods

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A category five cyclone, the strongest in Australia for nearly a century, hit the northern Queensland coast early yesterday morning, leaving thousands of people homeless. Cyclone Larry devastated the regional city of Innisfail and nearby townships, and destroyed about \$300 million worth of banana, sugar, pawpaw and rambutan crops.

In Innisfail, which has a population of 8,000, half the houses were damaged. Eighty percent of houses in Babinda, north of Innisfail, were affected and Mission Beach, to the south, was also severely hit. Late yesterday, emergency services authorities expressed amazement that no one had been reported killed. About 30 people have been reported injured.

Given the well-known danger of cyclones at this time of the year, federal and state authorities had ample warning. Larry first formed as a tropical storm off Fiji last Tuesday, and was declared a cyclone on Saturday morning, before being upgraded early on Sunday to a category four cyclone, 24 hours before it struck the coast.

As on-the-spot reports began to emerge, it seemed that older homes in poorer areas were worst damaged. At Kurramine Beach, Yvonne Cavey, who runs a motel, said: "All the fibro houses have just disintegrated, a lot of roofs have gone off, especially the first three streets back from the beach."

Residents told media outlets they had been terrified by the ferocity of the storm. "It sounded like the exorcist coming to get you—it was terrifying," Innisfail Barrier Reef Motel owner Amanda Fitzpatrick told ABC Radio. "It just looks like an atomic bomb has gone off."

Neil Clarke, mayor of Johnstone Shire Council, which covers Innisfail and the surrounding region, said the cyclone was an environmental and economic disaster. Parts of the town would resemble a "tent city" until alternative accommodation could be found. "We are in urgent need of accommodation for people, urgent need for water, we haven't got any power for the hospitals, for

water pumping stations ... we won't even have any water to drink by tomorrow."

Emergency workers were last night building a tent city at Innisfail airport. By late yesterday afternoon, 121,500 households and businesses were without power. A further 54,000 had experienced relatively brief interruptions and 10,200 had lost power but had had it restored.

The property damage bill from Cyclone Larry could reach a billion dollars, but the cost will be far higher in terms of jobs, economic livelihoods and personal hardship. Growers already have begun laying-off workers, with job losses in north Queensland expected to be as high as 4,000.

Worse may be to come. State Disaster Co-ordination Centre spokesman Peter Rekers warned low-lying areas could face flooding as heavy rainfall continued this week. He urged residents to take precautions because the rising waters also increased the danger posed by venomous snakes and crocodiles.

As recovery efforts get underway, the weather bureau has begun monitoring a second cyclone in the Coral Sea. Cyclone Wati was last night 1,400km east of Cairns and moving slowly westward.

While Larry is the first category five cyclone to cross the coast since 1918, up to a dozen dangerous cyclones form every season—November to April—off the northern coasts of Australia, according to Bureau of Meteorology data. Major cyclones to hit the region include Ada, which killed 14 people and caused severe damage to resorts on the Whitsunday Islands in 1970; Althea, which devastated Townsville in 1971; and Winifred, which hit the same area in 1986.

Larry's path was similar to that of the last category five cyclone in 1918, which occurred before cyclones were named. The storm killed 37 people in Innisfail and a further 60 people in the surrounding area, and damaged 95 percent of all buildings in the town.

Larry has surpassed in size and intensity Cyclone Tracy, a category four cyclone that wrecked the northern Australian city of Darwin in 1974, killing 65 people and leaving 25,000 homeless. Larry was also considerably wider than Tracy, 100km compared with 12km.

The primary concern of federal Prime Minister John Howard and Queensland state Premier Peter Beattie has been to prevent a public outcry about the lack of government preparedness. Both men are clearly nervous about any comparison to the crisis that engulfed the American White House in the weeks after Hurricane Katrina, which sent President George W Bush's approval ratings plummeting.

After daybreak on Monday, Beattie declared a local state of emergency, allowing federal authorities to become involved. Howard sent aides to meet with relief officials, military chiefs and government lawyers to belatedly plan a rescue and cleanup strategy.

On the ground, however, it was largely left to local emergency services, which are heavily dependent on volunteers, to come to victims' aid. Cairns City Council disaster coordination centre spokesman Gary Schofield said emergency services were "stretched to the limit" and estimated it would take at least five or six weeks to clean up Innisfail. So far, the government's direct contribution has been limited to a six-person army medical team, a navy Seahawk helicopter and three army Black Hawk helicopters as part of "Operation Larry Assist".

Interviewed on the ABC "Lateline" program last night, Howard was at pains to deflect references to the Bush administration's Katrina response. He announced that he would visit Innisfail soon, most likely tomorrow. "I do want the people of the affected area to know that their fellow Australians are concerned about what has happened to them and that the federal government will do its bit to help them get back on their feet," he said.

Asked about long-term aid for storm victims, however, Howard refused to commit himself. He said that for those who had lost homes, each adult would receive \$1,000 and each child \$400 as part of standing natural disaster relief arrangements between the federal and state governments—a pittance compared to the costs of obtaining alternative accommodation and rebuilding homes.

The prime minister declared that the federal government would partly reimburse the Queensland government for spending on relief assistance, infrastructure repair and concessional loans. He said that under these normal Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements, the federal

government had given Queensland around \$60 million for natural disasters since 2001-02. But that is only a fraction of the costs incurred by the victims of a series of floods, droughts and bush fires.

Instead of providing adequate government assistance, Howard and Beattie have been at pains to urge ordinary working people to "dig deep" to make donations to help victims.

Beattie also appealed to the insurance companies to "Have a heart, get up here, help these people so that we can get them rebuilt." But Insurance Disaster Response Organisation co-ordinator Graham Jones explained that damage to insured property could be only the "tip of the iceberg". Much infrastructure was not covered and most crops were uninsurable. "Grain crops are insured against fire or hail but tropical cyclones cause wind damage," Jones said.

Anxious to pre-empt anger over the official response, both the federal and state governments appealed to victims to have patience. Beattie, who rushed to Innisfail yesterday, warned of lengthy delays before basic services, including power and sewerage systems, were restored. "This is going to be a long, slow recovery," he emphasised.

Federal Attorney-General Philip Ruddock announced that the Australian Government Counter Disaster Task Force only met yesterday afternoon to co-ordinate official activities. Nevertheless, he urged people in the affected areas to remain "calm and patient" and to "be confident that everything is being done as soon as possible".



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