

Australia: Anger mounts over government response to Cyclone Larry

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Australian federal and state leaders visited cyclone devastated Innisfail, about 1,600 kilometres north of Brisbane, the Queensland state capital, last week claiming that victims of the March 20 disaster would be provided generous assistance. But as more information emerges about the havoc and human suffering caused by Cyclone Larry, frustration and anger is growing about the government's insufficient relief and reconstruction measures.

While the force-five cyclone, the fiercest to hit Australia in almost a century, did not strike the more heavily-populated cities of Townsville and Cairns in northern Queensland, damage to Innisfail and adjoining districts and the Atherton Tablelands is massive, with hundreds of families now homeless and local agriculture decimated.

Last Wednesday, Prime Minister Howard and Queensland state premier Peter Beattie, accompanied by scores of journalists, visited the Innisfail area. Anxious to counteract criticism that little was being done, they posed for photographs outside flooded local shops or embraced cyclone victims.

Earlier in the day, however, scores of angry residents jeered the two politicians when they arrived at the Innisfail court house and confronted a 200-metre long queue of people seeking emergency relief to purchase medicines, baby food and basic food items.

Some of the victims, including old age pensioners, pregnant women and single mothers, had been queuing for hours in the tropical heat and humidity to collect the \$50 to \$150 government relief being offered last week. Those seeking aid, some of whom collapsed from exhaustion, were forced to fill out a nine-page application form explaining their assets, income and how the relief money would be spent.

Graham Clarke told Beattie in the late afternoon: "You'll be going home and putting your feet on the table and having a warm cup of coffee tonight. I expected a queue [to get assistance] ... but pregnant women and children have been standing out here for five hours in the rain with no water. Are they [the government workers determining benefits] living in a different time zone? These people turned up at half past 11."

Another of those in line, 31 year-old Shiralee Hazel, was even blunter: "Effing do something now!" she exclaimed. "That is my message for them [the politicians].... What the hell are we supposed to do in this damn town? Yesterday, I waited over two and a half hours just to get \$50 out of them for my family. This is just ridiculous. This town will riot if nothing is done...." Hazel said she had been forced to move into her mother's two-bedroom flat, where between four and eight adults and two children were now living.

Ken and Laura Wiley, who worked as banana pickers, lost their home and most of their possessions in the cyclone. They had no insurance and were now living in their car. "We just want \$300 that will allow us to last a few more days and let us get out of town. There's nothing for us anymore," they said. "As soon as we get enough money for petrol and food we're going up to Cairns. We'll get labouring work somewhere."

Faced with such reactions the government, aided and abetted by the corporate media, is attempting to dress up the relief effort. Howard has

announced a \$100 million relief package, which consists of one-off \$10,000 tax free grants to small businesses and farmers, together with six-month income support and \$200,000 concessional loans for those re-establishing their businesses.

But with restart costs for farmers totaling millions, these amounts will do little to overcome the problems that confront both small farmers and small business operators. Nor is it clear from the government's emergency aid what will be available for working class families, pensioners and the unemployed.

While no deaths have been officially recorded, the cyclone has caused massive destruction. According to some reports, the affected area is almost half the size of Tasmania, with a conservative total damage bill estimated at over \$A1.5 billion.

During the cyclone more than 140,000 people lost electricity, including residents living as far away as Cairns and Townsville. Houses, schools and basic facilities, such as water, sewerage, medical services and telephone and mobile communications, as well as the agriculture, tourism and fishing industries, were destroyed or seriously damaged. While electricity is slowly being restored, no clear plans have been released for the rebuilding of other basic infrastructure, including schools—more than 40 are seriously damaged—health services and domestic housing.

Half the houses in Innisfail, population 8,000, have been badly damaged along with scores of others in adjoining towns and settlements. Figures vary, but it is estimated that one in three, or approximately 6,000 homes in the district, are either beyond repair or uninhabitable, requiring major work.

More than one hundred people are currently being accommodated at the Innisfail TAFE, where the Red Cross is providing basic food supplies and shelter. Four days after the cyclone, 35,000 people were still without power, and supplies were running short in local supermarkets and petrol filling stations.

Most local farmers are not expected to receive any farming income for at least 12 to 18 months. Eighty percent of the local banana industry, which directly employs more than 4,000 workers, supplying about 95 percent of the Australian market, has been wiped out, at an estimated cost of \$300 million.

Virtually all of the avocado crop, which was just about to be harvested and supplies 80 percent of the Australian market, has also been destroyed, at a cost of \$15 million. In addition, serious damage was inflicted on other tropical fruit producers.

The local sugar industry, which has faced deep financial difficulties over the past few years, was also flattened in the disaster, with damage estimated at around \$300 million. Australia is the third largest sugar exporter in the world, and the local district supplies about 10 percent or \$200 million per annum.

Insurance claims totaling over \$100 million were made in the first two days after the cyclone hit and this estimate is expected to increase in the coming days. Large numbers of Innisfail residents, however, especially

agricultural workers, have no insurance. Likewise, most sugar cane and banana growers have been unable to obtain insurance because the area is cyclone prone. Many small farmers have said they will have no choice but to sell their properties and leave the area.

The cyclone decimated Mission Beach and the adjoining communities of Bingil Bay, Mission, Wongaling and South Mission beaches and the nearby tropical rain forests—all popular tourist resorts. Three days after the disaster Mission Beach residents had no water, electricity or phones. Petrol supplies have been depleted and residents do not expect their electricity to be restored for several weeks.

Isolated farming communities have been particularly hard hit, but as yet there is little detailed information. According to some press reports, many outlying properties have been flooded in and received no assistance. One couple, Bev and Bryan Thomson, whose banana farm was totally destroyed, told the *Townsville Bulletin* that it was 72 hours before a helicopter made contact with them.

“Everything has gone. Our whole property has been torn to shreds and nobody has gone up that way to see the devastation, nobody has bothered. We have been forgotten,” Brian Thomson said. The couple, who said it would take two years before they could restore their farm, called on state authorities to check on rural homes.

“Before that [the helicopter contact] we saw no one,” Brian Thomson said. “It was unbelievable, everything was smashed or torn and we were left alone. People could have been killed.... Nobody came to see if we were OK, so how do we know if they are? We checked on our immediate neighbours, but properties out of town could be in big trouble.”

Late last week the federal government announced that retired military chief Major-General Peter Cosgrove would lead a new relief agency to deal with the cyclone damage. Cosgrove headed the Australian military occupation of East Timor in 1999 and was involved in the military relief operation following Cyclone Tracy which devastated Darwin in 1974. The media immediately hailed his appointment.

While the state and federal governments claim they are doing their utmost to restore services, the fact that a former military chief has been chosen to direct the operation demonstrates that existing Australian civil emergency services are totally inadequate. Moreover, the scale of the infrastructure crisis caused by the cyclone points to the fact that basic services—transport, power, communications, sewerage and roads—were already severely compromised.

Tropical north Queensland is one of the wettest places in Australia and yet the major highway is often cut by flooding. Years of political demands by local residents for it to be upgraded and rendered flood-proof have fallen on deaf ears.

Almost 300 millimetres of rain fell on the district the day after the cyclone, flooding rivers, inundating damaged properties and cutting roads. This seriously hampered relief measures.

The Bruce Highway, the main link between the state capital and far north Queensland, was cut in two places between Innisfail and Townsville and just north of Cardwell at Euramo. Scores of Australian military and private trucks attempting to transport generators and other emergency supplies to the Innisfail area were blocked. Some of the trucks were forced to travel an additional 1,000 kilometres in order to by-pass the flooding and deliver the supplies.

Electricity supplies would have been protected had they been put underground, something Ergon Energy and the state government have no intention of carrying out. State electricity union officials confirmed that a major factor in the breakdown of power supplies was the poor condition of the network, which has suffered 20 years of government and energy company neglect.

Moreover, according to some reports, many of the houses destroyed or seriously damaged by the cyclone did not comply with building codes, including those built following the revised regulations that were

introduced in the wake of the 1974 Cyclone Tracy disaster.

Government attempts to deflect attention from the growing concerns of ordinary people are being given every assistance by the corporate-controlled media.

After two or three days of extensive coverage, the catastrophe is no longer considered frontpage news, and the voices of its victims are no longer being reported. The *Sydney Morning Herald* on Friday, for example, relegated its reportage to page nine, while Murdoch’s *Daily Telegraph* put it on page eleven.

Queensland Premier Peter Beattie was interviewed on ABC-TV’s “Lateline” claiming that the government did not need any advice from “armchair critics” and that the angry comments of those queuing for emergency relief were not representative. Most people, he claimed, were “coping” with the situation.

At the same time, articles are beginning to appear denouncing those cyclone victims who have raised criticisms of the official response. An editorial in Murdoch’s national daily, the *Australian*, on Friday declared that there were “limits to the sovereign power of the state to protect us” and public expectations should be lowered.

“That no Australian should ever be a refugee is beyond debate and the responsibility of all levels of government to help is clear,” the newspaper stated. “But life after Larry will improve fastest for those who make their own luck.” In other words, anyone demanding the restoration of urgently-needed basic facilities should think again. Survival of the fittest is going to apply.

And if this message were not clear enough, Miranda Devine, writing in Sydney’s *Sun-Herald*, was even blunter.

In an article entitled “This is no New Orleans, so enough with the whingeing”, Devine, who reportedly earns \$250,000 a year for her daily column in the Fairfax newspaper, claimed that government and emergency services could not have been better prepared and that cyclone victims should simply stop complaining.

“The endless whingeing is a reflection on an affluent consumer culture in which people have come to expect that everything they want can be delivered in 30 seconds piping hot and preferably free if they only scream loud enough. No inconvenience is tolerable, not even for an instant, and the consumer is always right. The consumer has become a tyrant.”



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