

New Zealand: Hundreds left homeless after Christchurch earthquake

Tom Peters
6 September 2010

A state of emergency is in place in the New Zealand city of Christchurch, which was hit by a 7.1 magnitude earthquake on Saturday, the country's biggest earthquake since 1931. The quake struck the city of 350,000 people and the surrounding Canterbury region at 4:35am. The towns of Kaiapoi and Darfield, which were nearest the epicentre, suffered extensive damage. One person died of a heart attack, while two more were seriously injured—one by a falling chimney and the other by shattering glass. Many other people sustained minor injuries.

Reports indicate that the initial government response was disorganised. According to the *New Zealand Herald*, panicked residents fearing a tsunami were fleeing areas of the city in the aftermath of quake, clogging the badly damaged roads. It was not until about 6am that the Ministry of Civil Defence posted its first alert and police issued a statement urging people not to use the roads unless absolutely necessary. The state broadcaster, TVNZ, did not report on the quake until 7am. Prime Minister John Key yesterday dismissed claims that the National Party government had been slow to respond, telling TVNZ that “the first port of call is always individual responsibility”.

Following the quake, 80 extra police officers from Auckland were deployed to enforce an overnight curfew in the central business district. Christchurch mayor Bob Parker called in the Army to assist the police. Initial reports of “looting” were greatly exaggerated by the New Zealand and international media, with Canterbury police reporting just “a handful of incidents” according to *The Press*.

Urban search and rescue specialists have been sent to the city to search for anyone trapped in the rubble, but there have been no reports of missing persons. Casualties

were low largely because the majority of the population was in bed at the time. Had the quake hit during the day, hundreds may have died.

The damage to buildings, however, is enormous. Some houses have reportedly been ripped in half, while many others have damaged roofs. As many as nine out of 10 homes in the city's low lying areas have suffered water damage, according to the New Zealand Press Association. Older buildings have reportedly been worst hit.

In the central business district, shop facades collapsed, lining the streets with rubble. A *Dominion Post* headline described the city centre as resembling a “warzone”. Hundreds of buildings in the area are being inspected for damages. The CBD remained largely cordoned off today.

The Earthquake Commission (EQC), the state-run insurer, had received 4,164 claims for damages as of last night, but expects to get as many as 100,000. It estimates that it could pay out NZ\$1 billion (US\$720 million) to home owners, while the Treasury estimated a damage bill of \$2 billion. The total cost, including damage to public buildings and infrastructure such as roads, rail, power lines, and water and sewage pipes, is likely to be much higher. Around 60,000 people were still without water supplies yesterday and 10,000 were without power. Much of Christchurch's water supply is feared to be contaminated and the Avon River, which runs through the city, is reportedly “choked with sewage”.

On Saturday night, around 250 people took shelter in Civil Defence welfare centres around the city and 200 stayed on last night. Prime Minister Key told TVNZ yesterday that 341 houses had already been condemned and a further 337 have suffered substantial weather damage. According to the EQC, 20 percent of quake-hit

homes could be uninhabitable. These numbers are likely to increase as more buildings continue to be assessed. The city has been rocked by dozens of aftershocks over the weekend and severe wind and rain battered the region this morning, causing more damage. The rising level of the Waimakariri River could force more evacuations.

Many of those left homeless face an uncertain future. New Zealand's cabinet was due to meet today to discuss how to address the disaster. The EQC, which has around \$15 billion invested offshore, pays out a maximum of \$100,000 per claim. But payments are only made to residents who already have private home and contents insurance. An estimated 10 percent of residents are uninsured. Asked by TVNZ whether these people would receive assistance, Key said that this was a "moral hazard for the government, because on the one hand if we pay everybody out, why would people take insurance? On the other hand you're gonna have people with real hardship and deprivation, and it's getting that balancing act right. It's not going to be easy."

Key, who has a personal fortune estimated at around \$50 million, asserted that those without insurance had made a decision to "risk it".

Key's contempt for the fate of the poor contrasts starkly with his concern for big business. He declared one of the government's top priorities would be ensuring that Christchurch's AMI Stadium was thoroughly checked before next year's Rugby World Cup. Moreover, after imposing drastic austerity measures on the population—including cuts to health, education and welfare spending—the government last week bailed out investors in the failed company South Canterbury Finance to the tune of \$1.7 billion in public money.



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