

Australia: Major flooding hits hundreds of thousands of Queensland residents

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After several days of torrential rain, and in the wake of tropical cyclone Tasha on December 26, thousands of residents in the north-eastern Australian state of Queensland have been forced to evacuate their homes in the worst flooding in five decades. Australia has experienced the wettest September-to-November this year on record, with Brisbane, the Queensland state capital, recording its wettest December in more than 150 years.

The unprecedented downpours in Queensland have flooded almost half the state, or an area larger than France and Germany combined, destroying crops and livestock and inundating and isolating dozens of towns, destroying homes, schools, medical centres and community facilities. Major rain storms are forecast across the state until at least January 5.

At this point 38 Queensland regions have been officially declared “natural disaster” areas, with more than 200,000 people directly impacted and over 300 roads, including two major highways into Brisbane, closed.

The latest floods are part of an increasing pattern, not just in Australia, but internationally, and no longer confined to the poverty-stricken regions of Asia and Africa. This year major floods have killed thousands of ordinary people and destroyed the livelihoods of millions in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic and the US.

While each disaster has been described by the various national governments as an unavoidable “natural disaster” they are often man-made—the direct result of ongoing government neglect of basic infrastructure, emergency services and a complete lack of planning.

On Tuesday, Australian Defence Force Black Hawk helicopters were mobilised to evacuate the 300 residents of Theodore after flooding swamped the town, the first settlement in Queensland history to be evacuated in its entirety. Yesterday Condamine, in the Darling Downs, became the second, and plans have been activated to

remove over 2,500 people from Emerald, now under threat from the rising Nogoa River.

An estimated 7,500 hectares of cotton is already flooded outside Emerald, along with hundreds of hectares of citrus trees. Floods in 2008 forced the evacuation of the town and left a \$50 million damage bill. Many farmers have still not recovered.

One of Queensland’s biggest citrus producers, John Presler, told the media yesterday that much of his property was flooded. “What we’ve got is 1,300 acres of citrus under water,” he said. “In 2008 we had about 400 acres of citrus under and this time it’s much, much worse. It was really, really under-estimated as to the magnitude of this flood and the speed with which it has risen.”

Four hundred homes have been inundated in Bundaberg, east of Emerald, after the Burnett River cut the CBD in half, and by this weekend Rockhampton, a city of over 75,000, could be cut off completely from the rest of the state.

Hundreds of Queensland farmers now face the destruction of their livelihoods with grain, cotton, sugar cane, animal stock and fruit and vegetable crops all affected. The Agforce farming group estimates that 50 percent of Queensland crops have been seriously hit, with yields down by 20 percent. Food prices are expected to double and triple over the next weeks, and are predicted to remain high for at least 6 months.

The state’s coal industry has also been severely hit, with major companies facing hundreds of millions of dollars in lost production as mines are closed and production cut. Australia is the world’s largest exporter of coking coal, accounting for about two-thirds of global trade. The Rio Tinto group has declared “force majeure” at four of its coal mines—a contractual clause allowing the company to miss deliveries because of circumstances beyond its control.

Two of Australia’s biggest coal export

terminals—Dalrymple Bay and Gladstone Port—together with Australia's top coal transporter, have either closed or cutback operations. Mining and some other industries are expected to remain closed for up to a month, impacting on workers across the state.

Emergency authorities are stretched to the limit, with many residents caught by surprise at the rapidity of rising flood waters. Fears are now emerging of food shortages in isolated areas cut off by the floods. Drinking water is scarce because of contamination from sewerage overflows, chemicals, rubbish and animal carcasses. Residents have been asked to boil water before drinking because of growing concern over the spread of disease.

Although only one life has reportedly been lost so far, several people have narrowly escaped. Families with young children have been rescued after desperately clinging to trees, and last night several people were winched by helicopters from roof tops in Bundaberg. A 15-year-old boy was airlifted to Brisbane hospital after being electrocuted when he crossed a flooded railway track. Yesterday a helicopter involved in rescue operations crashed, but miraculously no one was injured.

While it is difficult to estimate the total damage as rivers continue to break new height records, economists have predicted damage costs could reach \$6 billion. Some communities and individuals may never recover. Rural authorities and health professionals have raised concerns about severely indebted farmers, who have now lost entire crops, and fear a further increase in rural suicides.

On Wednesday, Queensland Labor Premier Anna Bligh described the situation as “without precedent in our recorded history” and predicted the cost of rebuilding roads and bridges alone to be more than \$1.5 billion.

The state government's commitment to a disaster relief fund, however, has been a derisory \$1 million. Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard has matched Bligh's pittance with \$1 million from the commonwealth, bringing the total funds from the state and federal Labor governments to a miserly \$2 million.

And when Gillard finally deigned to visit the state today, days after the disaster hit, she was at pains to tell reporters in Bundaberg that the flood damage would not impact on her government's determination to return the Australian budget to surplus by 2012/13.

Gillard also defended her government's contribution to Queensland flood relief, claiming there could be additional amounts but refused to say how much, “because I can't tell you what the damage is going to be”.

Gillard's response is not an aberration. It reveals the

official contempt and indifference by state and federal governments to the plight of thousands of ordinary Queensland families, many of whom are witnessing their homes and livelihoods being washed away before their eyes.

The federal Labor government has committed billions of dollars to the criminal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but can find nothing to develop the infrastructure required to prevent, or at least substantially limit, the kind of disaster now unfolding in Queensland. Individuals and small communities have been largely left to their own devices with little or no support from governments, despite similar events occurring in the recent past.

Last night Queensland Premier Bligh told ABC television's “The 7.30 Report” that the floods were an “unprecedented tragedy” and reiterated government calls for the public to “dig deep” and donate as much as possible to flood relief funds. It is now commonplace for public donations by ordinary people to outdo the niggardly contributions by governments and major corporations.

While Bligh noted that some individuals or families may be eligible for hardship grants, she added the proviso that all applications would be means tested. Yesterday the ABC reported that hardship grants to replace food, clothing and medicine were available, totalling the paltry amount of \$170 for individuals and up to \$850 for families.

At the same time, the Insurance Council of Australia declared the entire state a disaster zone. Reports are already appearing in the media of distraught residents and small businesses being ineligible for insurance pay-outs, with many hundreds of people totally uninsured.

Many of the flood victims have been unable to afford insurance because premiums have doubled in the last year, in the wake of previous floods. Moreover, most insurance companies impose strict rules on home insurance, refusing to pay claims unless the floods were caused by rain falling in the immediate area of the home. Millions of dollars of agricultural crops are also not insured because current insurance only covers crop damage caused by fire and hail.



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