

Serious floods threaten thousands in Australia's third largest city

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Australia's flood crisis has taken a serious turn for the worse, with the official death toll from the wall of water that engulfed towns west of the Queensland state capital of Brisbane during the past two days now at 12 and emergency authorities predicting that it could reach 30. More than 90 people remained unaccounted for this morning. Even worse is to come today and tomorrow as the deluge overtakes Ipswich, on the outskirts of Brisbane, and surges through the capital itself.

Continuing heavy rain from a La Niña weather pattern has led to warnings that the inundation of Australia's third largest city will exceed the destructive floods that submerged Brisbane in January 1974, killing 14 people and flooding almost 6,000 homes. The Wivenhoe Dam, built to "flood-proof" the city after the 1974 disaster, has proven unable to cope with the sheer volume of water—estimated at the equivalent of two Sydney Harbours per day—surging down its catchment valleys. Releases of water from the dam today will add to the flood heading to Brisbane.

Hundreds of people were evacuated from their homes at Ipswich last night, with about one-third of the city expected to go under water today. Evacuations also commenced in Brisbane, where more than 30 low-lying suburbs have been listed as being at risk. The Brisbane River is expected to peak this afternoon at around 4.5 metres, and to rise above the 1974 peak of 5.45 metres tomorrow morning when a high tide is due at 4 a.m. The flooding in Brisbane is now forecast to last for days, extending a crisis that has already affected large parts of Queensland since mid-December.

Official estimates of the likely damage in Brisbane have been repeatedly upgraded in the past 24 hours. According to the latest warnings today, almost 20,000 homes are set to be inundated, with a further 20,000 properties to be affected to some degree. This represents about 10 percent of the 400,000 buildings and homes in Brisbane, a metropolis of almost two million people.

Other previously flooded towns in Queensland, including Dalby and Condamine, are facing a new deluge, and rivers have risen in numerous parts of northern New South Wales,

as well as in western Victoria and northern Western Australia. In some areas of Queensland, serious longer-term health risks are appearing, including snake and crocodile infestation and water-borne and mosquito-borne diseases.

A full picture will only emerge today of the death and devastation in the Lockyer Valley, west of Brisbane, where homes and cars were swept away in several towns and villages, including Grantham, Gatton, Murphys Creek, Withcott, Helidon, Laidley and Forest Hill. Entire families remain missing. Terrible stories have begun to be told of people who were caught completely unawares by Monday's torrent of water, having received no official warnings.

Les Schultz, a former resident of Grantham, told journalists of screams coming from inside one house ripped off its foundations and hurtling downstream. Quoting a friend, who witnessed the scene, he said: "This home just floated past his house with people yelling out for help. But no one could help them."

Rescue crew officer David Turnbull from Queensland Emergency Services said it was "so frustrating" that more people could not be saved by the two emergency helicopters that winched people to safety from rooftops in Grantham and Helidon. "They were everywhere, entire families had climbed up on their roofs—they had no alternative."

These events, and the looming disaster in Brisbane, amount to a colossal failure by governments and the private profit system, which have proven incapable of forewarning and protecting ordinary people from the catastrophe. Families and entire communities have been left to fend for themselves. Today's *Australian* carries a photograph of a distressed mother and her children pleading for help as floodwaters poured through Burpengary on Brisbane's northern outskirts. Their hand-painted sign said: "NO PHONE NO POWER".

Basic infrastructure, including electricity, mobile and landline telephone services, transport and emergency services, have either collapsed or been cut off. Thousands of residents of low-lying areas of Ipswich and Brisbane had their electricity turned off today. Many people have been

stranded, isolated from official evacuation sites. Rescue and search agencies, which depend heavily on volunteers, have been swamped and unable to help many victims.

Tens of thousands of people received no flood warnings or were sent government emergency messages hours after their areas had been submerged in water. The first SMS text and phone voice messages from the National Emergency Warning System (NEWS) were sent after 8 p.m. on Monday, six hours after the rural city of Toowoomba had been swamped by water and too late to alert Lockyer Valley residents. The NEWS was created after Victoria's bushfire emergency in 2009, designed to give people more warning of disasters. Yesterday, Queensland Premier Ann Bligh confirmed that Toowoomba residents received no government warning, but defended the failure. "This was purely an emergency response situation with no warning at all, basically, to emergency services. We simply had to react the best way we could," she said.

Some devastated residents have started to speak out against the lack of official warnings and assistance. Mardi Neilson, whose young family was finally rescued by an army helicopter from Forest Hill, told the *Australian* the experience was "utterly terrifying". She said the family did not receive an emergency warning until 11 a.m. yesterday, almost two hours after the deluge hit and they had been stranded on their top-floor balcony. "There was absolutely no warning, we just had no idea it would be this bad," she said. "Surely someone would have known the water was going to hit as hard as it did, but there was no loudspeaker, no doorknock, nothing to tell us to get out."

On the northern outskirts of Brisbane, particularly in the low-lying areas of Caboolture and Strathpine, families were simply told yesterday to leave as quickly as possible, with no time to pack up valuables or move belongings to higher ground. Chris Shears of Caboolture said: "We're just so helpless. The SES [State Emergency Service] won't come, the police won't come. We don't know what we're going to do."

Prime Minister Julia Gillard has displayed indifference to the plight of the flood victims, many of whom live in poorer areas on flood plains. Yesterday, she claimed that her federal government was "doing all it can to help people affected by the flooding". She referred to \$13 million being paid out for 10,000 claims under a government scheme that offers subsistence-level payments to those who can prove that they have lost their sources of income. Beyond that, the Labor government has deployed military resources and personnel, which only underscores the inadequacy of civil emergency services.

Gillard has ruled out any substantial government spending for relief, recovery or rebuilding programs, despite the

immense social cost of the floods and the widespread destruction of roads, bridges, railway lines and other essential infrastructure. Yesterday, she insisted there would be no deviation from her government's pledge to the financial markets to eliminate the budget deficit produced by the global financial crisis by 2012-13. "We will bring the budget to surplus in 2012-13, and yes that will entail some tough choices," she said, warning that any spending on flood damage would have to be offset by cuts elsewhere.

Earlier in the week, Gillard spoke of having already contributed the small sum of \$40 million to efforts to flood-proof the Bruce Highway. Large areas of Queensland remain isolated because the road, the main route between Brisbane and the north of the state, has been cut for days near the flooded regional cities of Rockhampton and Maryborough. Gillard refused to make any specific commitments, saying only that the flood-proofing would be "re-prioritised".

Both Gillard and Bligh have depicted the floods as simply freakish acts of nature. The truth is that, as meteorologists and flood management experts have explained, the La Niña weather pattern and the flood disaster were both predictable. The Labor leaders are seeking to divert attention away from the systemic factors that have magnified the disaster—such as the cutting back of flood mitigation programs, the under-funding of civil emergency services, the approval of housing estates in flood-prone areas, the commercialisation or privatisation of basic infrastructure such as water supply, roads and railways, and the deforestation of catchment areas (see: "Queensland crisis points to lack of flood mitigation and basic infrastructure").

In the face of the growing evidence of official neglect and indifference, today's *Australian* editorial urged the nation to "stick together" and "not flinch in the face of floods of an almost unimaginable extent". It declared that it would be a mistake to "jump to conclusions" and attribute the disaster to "climate change, inadequate urban planning or emergency service shortcomings". But, just as the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe did in the United States in 2005, the Australian floods crisis is laying bare a toxic combination of chronic infrastructure decay, government under-funding, and profit-driven development that has become a danger to the lives and well-being of millions of people.



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