

Floods crisis widens in Australia

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Australia's flood crisis has spread to the southern states of Victoria and Tasmania over the past few days, adding to the devastation and misery already experienced by people in Brisbane and across areas of Queensland, northern New South Wales and the central coast of Western Australia.

A total of 46 Victorian rural towns have been flooded so far, affecting more than 1,600 properties and displacing at least 3,500 people, with 5,200 calls for assistance to emergency services. Some towns, such as Rochester and Charlton, had to be completely evacuated. More towns could be engulfed later this week, many of them having endured two other floods in the past five months. The towns of Donald, Boort, Quambatook and Culgoa are expected to flood in the next 48 hours.

Parts of the state capital, Melbourne, Australia's second largest city, were also affected. There was flash flooding across the city on Friday morning, with cars stuck in deep water in the north of the city and the Yarra River bursting its banks. At one point, flooding was feared from another inner-city river, the Maribyrnong.

Parts of the island state of Tasmania were inundated last Thursday and Friday, with dams and rivers in the north, north-west and east bursting their banks, forcing 500 people to be evacuated from 120 homes and businesses. Some hospital and aged-care facilities were evacuated as a precaution and several coastal communities were isolated. Bridges were swamped and many of the state's northern roads were cut.

In parts of northern NSW, several towns and communities have been evacuated or isolated, while residents of Western Australia's Gascoyne region, including the town of Carnarvon, are still cleaning up after two floods in as many weeks.

The most severe destruction remains that in Brisbane,

the Queensland state capital, and its surrounding areas. The discovery of four more bodies in the past three days brought the death toll in Brisbane and the valleys to its west to 20 in the past week, with another 10 people missing, feared drowned. Even as a cleanup operation commenced in Brisbane, high tides brought the Brisbane River creeping back into the suburbs of Milton and Auchenflower for some time yesterday, and flooding may return on Friday's king tide. Other areas of Queensland are affected by overflowing rivers, including the southern towns of Condamine and St George, both of which have been hit twice in two weeks. People in flooded major regional centres, such as Toowoomba, Rockhampton, Maryborough and Emerald, are still struggling to recover.

Queensland Premier Anna Bligh reported yesterday that across the state 500,000 square kilometres (an area as large as France) had been affected, including 86 towns and cities, and that 2 million people were living in areas declared disaster zones. Warning residents that many of their homes would be uninhabitable for weeks, months or even years, Bligh said 28,000 homes would need to be rebuilt. Ninety-two schools had been inundated and 86 childcare centres made inaccessible.

Today, more than 20,000 homes in Brisbane remain without power, including four high-rise buildings in the central business district. The Red Cross, which is managing evacuation centres, is still accommodating 1,000 evacuees, 600 of them in Brisbane and 200 in Ipswich.

Much of the media focus has been on an outpouring of social solidarity, with thousands of volunteers turning out in Brisbane and nearby Ipswich with brooms, shovels and mops to help flood victims start to clean out their wrecked homes and streets. By one media estimate, as many as 100,000 people participated in an "army of angels". Brisbane City Lord Mayor Campbell Newman said there were 12,000 registered volunteers on Saturday and 10,300

yesterday, but many more people were involved informally. Echoing the media, Newman claimed: “This is the sort of community spirit that sets us apart from the rest of the world.”

There is nothing peculiar to Queensland or Australia about this turnout. It expresses a powerful human instinct of collective aid and mutual support. In times of emergency, for all the market-driven propaganda about individuals being genetically wired to compete with each other, this human spirit comes to the fore. Numerous other stories have emerged of ordinary people risking their own lives to rescue others. Governments and the media, however, are exploiting this sentiment to cover up the causes of the disaster and the political issues that it raises.

For all the talk of everyone “pulling together,” there is evidence of efforts by the authorities to suppress simmering discontent. Martin Warburton, an elected representative of the flood-ravaged residents of Grantham, in the Lockyer Valley near Brisbane, where homes and cars were swept away and many people were unable to be rescued, was threatened with arrest by police if he raised complaints with Bligh and Prime Minister Julia Gillard when they briefly toured the valley last week. A police sergeant told Warburton he would be arrested for “inciting fear and anger in the community”.

Warburton has criticised the inadequacy of the rescue operations, noting that he saw eight media helicopters but only one emergency helicopter as the torrent raged through the town. The police threat followed warnings issued to the public and the media by army Major-General Mick Slater—who was appointed by Bligh, with Gillard’s approval, to head the Queensland Flood Recovery Taskforce—not to allow any appearance of “divisiveness” that would hamper the “success” of the recovery operation. The remark indicates that the military has been mobilised not simply to provide immediate aid to flood victims. (See: “Queensland flood chief Major-General Mick Slater issues ominous warning”).

In overtly political comments, Slater told today’s *Australian* that competition for reconstruction funds would cause frictions within and among communities as “hard decisions” were taken on priorities. Over the weekend, Gillard boosted the military contingent in the Queensland flood zones to 1,447 and announced that soldiers would undertake some basic civilian tasks,

including manning evacuation centres, helping to mop out houses and businesses, and directing traffic. This operation, set to last for months, sets a precedent for the domestic deployment of the armed forces.

The military mobilisation also highlights the inadequacy of the civilian emergency services and the paucity of the relief response of the government itself. Treasurer Wayne Swan said yesterday that the federal government had thus far paid out \$52 million in immediate support to victims, and said the Queensland and federal governments would donate an additional \$10 million each to Bligh’s public flood appeal. These tiny sums are a contrast to the \$85 million already raised from ordinary people.

Today it was confirmed that the insurance companies would reject the pleas made by Gillard, Bligh and Swan for them to show “compassion” for the estimated half of the flood victims who are not insured for flood damage. Insurance Council of Australia head Robert Whelan told the *Australian Financial Review* that insurers would only pay out for flash flooding, not rising creeks and rivers, in strict accordance with the fine print of their insurance policies, because otherwise the industry would be “in a very difficult financial position”.

In contrast to the “community spirit” displayed by ordinary people, the Gillard government has refused to commit substantial resources to either aiding victims or carrying out the major reconstruction and restructuring necessary to prevent future flood tragedies. It is intent on meeting the demands of the financial markets for the elimination by 2012-13 of the budget deficit left from bailing out business in the wake of the 2008 global financial crash.

As if a reminder were needed, it was provided by last Friday’s *Australian* editorial. The Murdoch-owned newspaper warned Gillard that she had “cause for pause” before making good on her limited promises to help victims.



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