

Australia: Queensland floods worsen, with major regional towns cut off

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Floods continue to wreak havoc across Australia's north-eastern state of Queensland, killing three people and taking the death toll since the torrential rain and flooding began nearly a month ago to 10. More than 200,000 people have been directly affected, with scores of towns isolated, thousands of homes inundated and billions of dollars lost in agricultural and mining exports.

On Sunday, Queensland Treasurer Andrew Fraser described the floods as "a disaster of biblical proportions" and delayed release of the state's mid-year fiscal update. Some estimates now put the cost of the disaster at more than \$6 billion.

The regional city of Rockhampton—population 75,000 and about 500 kilometres north of the state capital, Brisbane—has now been cut off by the Fitzroy River. Predictions are that at least 40 percent of the city's homes will be inundated when the river reaches a peak of 9.4 metres on Wednesday. The city is expected to be surrounded by water for at least 10 days.

Yesterday military vehicles, carrying 14 tons of food and medicine supplies, were flown into Mackay to be shuttled south via road into Rockhampton, but this northern link into the city, along with all rail and airline transport, is now closed. Three Australian Defence Forces Black Hawk helicopters have been relocated to transport food supplies to Rockhampton over the next days.

An evacuation centre has been established in the city for up to 1,500 residents, but as of Sunday night only around 80 residents were using it. Others were staying with relatives or friends, while some were refusing to evacuate, concerned their unattended homes and businesses would be looted. Many people have no insurance because they cannot afford the high premiums that have doubled over the last year, or because insurance companies refuse to insure homes and businesses in low-lying areas.

Media reports have shown police officers wading chest-high through the muddy waters ordering people to leave their homes. Resident Reg Wilson told ABC radio he didn't want to leave his home, but police said he had no choice and

had to leave by 5 p.m. "When a man with a gun talks to you like that, you get out," he said.

Flood waters are slowly receding in Bundaberg and Emerald, allowing some evacuated residents to re-enter, assess the damage and begin cleaning and repair work that is expected to take months. Residents are being warned to take great caution entering or re-entering flooded areas because of strong currents and venomous snakes.

Yesterday 13 tons of disinfectant and clean-up equipment was airlifted into Theodore, one of the first towns to be fully evacuated last week. A small team of government workers was flown in via helicopters to begin repairing vital infrastructure, such as power, water and sewerage, and to inspect the hospital. Residents will not be permitted to enter their homes until power is re-connected and certified by an electrician, which could take weeks.

In southwest Queensland, towns such as St George, Surat and Dirranbandi are preparing emergency services and evacuation centres as the floods head southward. Dirranbandi—north of the New South Wales border—has already been isolated for nearly three weeks.

The floods have shut down coal mines and ore transportation, reducing coking coal exports to a trickle. Australia is the world's largest exporter of coking coal, accounting for two-thirds of global trade. Agricultural losses will also run into the billions, with half the nation's wheat crop, or about 10 million tonnes, downgraded to less than milling quality. Cotton, sugar cane and other agricultural goods have also been seriously affected.

Graincorp corporate affairs manager David Ginns told Reuters yesterday that floods had halted all road and rail grain transportation: "We can't move anything by rail, full stop," he said. "We have either got trains that are marooned out in western areas and cannot come to the coast, or trains that are on the coast and cannot go to the west."

With millions of hectares under water—an area larger than Germany and France combined—and major export losses, the federal and Queensland governments have been forced to provide more than the derisory \$2 million relief assistance

initially pledged.

On Sunday Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard issued a joint statement with Queensland Premier Anna Bligh announcing extended emergency support. Residents can now apply for \$1,000 for each eligible adult and \$400 for each child under the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment scheme. Some flood victims can apply for up to \$4,980 per family to replace household goods and up to \$13,800 for house repairs.

Financial assistance of up to \$25,000 is also available to farmers for cleanup, removal of debris, disposal of dead stock and the dropping of urgent fodder to livestock. For small business, the grants are to assist operators assume trading as soon as possible.

The government's "aid" is a drop in the ocean compared with the losses many tens of thousands of residents and small business people are facing. Moreover, yesterday federal opposition leader Tony Abbott told the media that Centrelink had tightened up its relief eligibility requirements.

During flooding last March, the federal Labor government made relief payments available to any resident who had been isolated in or from their homes for more than 24 hours or had lost utilities for more than 48 hours. Abbott claimed that relief payments this time would only be available to those whose homes were seriously damaged or who had been badly injured by the floods.

While the corporate media has reported little criticism of state and federal government responses to the floods, and omitted any reference to the absence of serious infrastructure to prevent or alleviate the disaster, residents are beginning to raise their own concerns.

Ralph Benz, who owns a small shop and caravan park in Hebel, south of Dirranbandi, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he received no government assistance after the March 2010 floods, which cut off the area for six weeks.

"We applied for aid then but there was nothing forthcoming, so I'm guessing it will be the same this time.... They're not helping the little shopkeepers, we're on our own and we're not eligible for insurance."

Benz said "nothing" had been done to protect the roads: "The government has still not fixed the roads since the March flood and we're facing something that could be bigger than those floods. The roads are a disgrace—not just [in] Queensland but [in] New South Wales as well.

"Most support is means tested and because we have a shop and caravan park—that goes down as assets. In fact we're not making money and don't have much in the bank. We were struggling in March to keep the doors open, but that's seen by the government as bad luck."

Queensland Premier Anna Bligh was asked on the ABC's

"7.30 Report" last night what her government had done to "better protect" Queensland communities.

Bligh responded by claiming that the government had learnt from previous disasters and had established SMS warnings and given state police special powers to direct the emergency response.

These measures do nothing to counteract what are increasingly predictable disasters. Queensland residents have been left totally unprotected, with the government refusing to do what is necessary to ensure that road and rail routes and other basic services remain accessible during flooding in large parts of the state.

Yesterday Rockhampton mayor Brad Carter appealed to the state and federal governments to provide "some form of engineering solutions that addresses the flooding issues" including, "better drainage systems" and a "flood free [rail] corridor across the Fitzroy River". These appeals will fall on deaf ears.

In November last year, Engineers Australia released its annual report on roads, rail, water, ports, airports, electricity and telecommunications. It described Queensland infrastructure as "woefully inadequate" with "rural and regional infrastructure particularly bad."

In 2009, the federal Labor government estimated that natural disasters caused more than \$1 billion damage each year to Australian homes, businesses and infrastructure, along with serious disruption to communities. Its response was to allocate just \$18 million in Disaster Mitigation funding nationally, with \$5.3 million to Queensland.

Ralph Benz told the WSWS that flooding, road, and other major infrastructure problems confronting Dirranbandi were not just confined to his community: "I'm not just talking about the problems in this town but every town. What about Bundaberg and Rockhampton and all the stores and shops that have been inundated there? The chances are that many of those businesses are going to financially go under. They won't be able to afford to open up again.

"People are still slowly, slowly recovering from the last floods, but this could be the nail in the coffin for quite a few of them," he added.

The crisis confronting Queensland residents is expected to continue, with the Bureau of Meteorology predicting "a very severe wet season". In November, Bureau chief Jim Davis warned the Bligh government that there could be five or six cyclones this season.



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