

Australia: Queensland crisis points to lack of flood mitigation and basic infrastructure

Richard Phillips
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Vast areas of southern and central Queensland remain inundated as three of the state's major river systems—the Fitzroy, Condamine and Burnett rivers—continue to reach record heights, impacting on more than 200,000 residents and bringing the coal industry and wide sections of agriculture to a standstill.

According to the latest forecasts, weekend downpours will produce flash flooding on the coast and see southern Queensland towns such as St George, Surat, Hebel and Dirranbandi engulfed. Over the next few days, flooding will move into north-eastern New South Wales, isolating small towns such as Goodooga, Weilmoringle and Angledool, along with other communities. South Australian and Victorian authorities have warned that serious flooding could eventually occur right along the Murray River system.

While the Australian media is providing blanket coverage of the disaster, there is a deafening silence about the underlying factors that have produced it. Above all, there has been no examination of the failure of federal, state and local authorities to adequately defend the homes and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people.

The immediate cause of the ocean of water covering the state—estimated to be the size of Germany and France combined—is the La Niña weather pattern, along with rainfall from the recent Tropical Cyclone Tasha. The current La Niña, which began in autumn 2010 and is expected to continue until April, has produced the wettest season on record in both Queensland and the Northern Territory, with most of the rain falling in the last six months.

La Niña occurs when surface sea temperatures are cooler than normal in the eastern Pacific, and warmer than usual in the western Pacific. This produces a build up of warmer water along Australia's east coast that

drags in moist air and produces massive downpours.

While state and federal politicians have declared the floods to be at “Biblical proportions”, implying that masses of people have been hit by an unpredictable natural event, heavy flooding in Queensland has been a regular occurrence since its settlement in the 19th century. Major flooding and high death tolls, particularly during the late-1800s and the early part of the 20th century, was a common feature of life.

The current catastrophe was not unforeseen. And the scale of the damage it has wrought is largely the product of the current socio-economic order—the capitalist private profit system.

On Wednesday Queensland Premier Anna Bligh called an emergency cabinet meeting and appointed Army Major General Mick Slater as head of the Flood Recovery Task Force.

Slater's appointment was immediately hailed by the media, with an *Australian Financial Review* column today declaring that the “public likes the calming effect that the armed forces seem to bring after major disasters.” Notwithstanding the spurious character of this claim, the fact that a military chief has been chosen to direct relief operations demonstrates that the state's civil emergency services are totally inadequate.

Moreover, the growing financial impact of the floods, predicted to be over \$9 billion, the disastrous human cost and ongoing destruction of basic services—sewerage, fresh water, power, road and rail services—demonstrates that flood mitigation measures and other basic infrastructure were either non-existent or severely compromised.

There is no question that many complex factors have combined to produce the current crisis. Nevertheless, a number of key issues are already apparent.

Long-term clearing of forests and ground cover for

the large-scale production of various agricultural commodities has dramatically increased the extent and speed of flood runoff and led to serious silting of rivers. It is well known that the extensive destruction of native forests in order to cultivate vast areas of sugar cane has exacerbated flooding.

Huge cotton farms and other agri-business enterprises established in Queensland and northern New South Wales during the past three and half decades has involved the removal of natural ground cover and other natural barriers that slowed heavy downpours and acted as a brake on flooding.

At the same time, federal, state and local authorities have allowed property developers and real estate interests to build inappropriate housing on low-lying flood plains. Years ago, Queensland residents in flood prone areas built homes at least two metres above the ground, often on “stilts”, but these have been replaced with lower-cost, low-rise homes, leading to inevitable inundation.

Eighty percent of the town of Emerald, for example, was flooded on December 29. Many of the homes were low-rise and built on flood plains. While scores of them were flooded three years ago, in January 2008, the local council continued to allow similar dwellings to be built.

A recent position paper released by Engineers Australia entitled “Flooding and Flooding Mitigation”, points out that Australia’s variable climate means there are no “flood free” rivers or channels and warns that most official flood-risk analysis is based on the “false assumption” that general climatic conditions do not vary.

The paper calls for the development of flood mitigation dams, retarding basins, channel levees and other flood reduction methods, as well as appropriate planning and land zoning legislation, particularly within flood plains, public education and information programs, flood insurance and flood warning systems.

It notes, however, “that there are large differences in the standards applied in different regions of Australia and even in different regions within the same state.” In other words, there is no nationally uniform code of practice. The demands of the market and the drive for profit determine all decisions.

No serious dam construction or water conservation measures have been implemented in Australia during the past three decades. Likewise, calls by ordinary

Queenslanders for highways and railroads to be upgraded and made flood-proof have been largely ignored by state authorities. The inundation of these basic transport links—many of which have now been severely damaged—is seriously hampering relief measures and will continue to impact on communities for months, if not years to come.

Chas Keys, a retired deputy director-general of the State Emergency Service and well known authority on flood mitigation, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* today that federal funding for flood management had declined since the 1990s, with responsibility shifted onto local councils.

Keys said that pressure from property developers for local councils to allow construction on flood plains was intensifying. “It’s just madness that we keep making these problems,” he said. “We need to recognise that floods are inevitable and we have to live with them.”

State funding for flood control is an insult. The New South Wales Department of the Environment, Climate Change and Water, for example, has only provided local authorities with \$130 million in the past decade, or about \$13 million per year, a minuscule amount for Australia’s most populous state.

In line with their attitude to bushfires and other disasters, the response of state and federal authorities to flooding is to promote “self-reliance”—in other words, placing full responsibility on the shoulders of individuals and ill-equipped communities to devise their own flood-mitigation and home safety measures. Confronted with the vast floods now covering south and central Queensland, along with the need for massive repair and reconstruction operations, individual and community “self reliance” is simply impossible.



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