

Australia: More deaths as a “wall of water” engulfs Queensland towns

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At least eight people, including four children, were killed and more than 70 remain missing, feared dead, after devastating flash floods smashed their way through Toowoomba and nearby towns west of the Queensland capital Brisbane yesterday. The latest fatalities take the flood death toll to 19 since mid-December, when the state was hit by major flooding caused by a La Niña weather pattern.

Those trapped in Toowoomba (population 128,600), Grantham, Withcott and several other small towns in the Lockyer Valley desperately clung to trees or traffic signs or climbed on top of cars or houses after a massive downpour hit the area yesterday.

Helicopter services carried out more than 40 roof-top rescues before heavy fog and rain prevented further operations, while residents and emergency crews heroically battled to save those trapped by the wall of water that swept through the completely unprepared communities.

Scores of homes, cars, vans and other large objects, including a shipping container, were thrown into trees, bridges and buildings after local creeks and rivers burst their banks and inundated the area. ABC radio reported this morning that the flood force was so strong that one home was carried downstream from Murphy to Grantham, about 20 kilometres away.

Last night Queensland police officials admitted they were not sure how many people were missing and that searches would continue today. Four children and whole families are among those unaccounted for.

Lockyer Valley Mayor Steve Jones told the media that Withcott looked like it had been “hit by an atomic bomb” or Cyclone Tracy, which completely flattened Darwin in 1974. Queensland Police Commissioner Bob Atkinson described the flooding as “an inland instant tsunami”.

Henry Wells, a Toowoomba resident, told today’s *Sydney Morning Herald*: “It came up so quickly that literally one moment it was just raining and the next it was pouring and within 10 minutes every roadway coming down the side of the hill was just a sheet of water.”

Office worker Sandra Van der Kley told the media that West Creek was close to 100 metres wide at the height of floods. “It was like an ocean, there were waves—I have never seen anything like it,” she said.

While state Labor Premier Anna Bligh described yesterday’s devastation in Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley as Queensland’s “darkest hour”, she insisted that what had occurred was “a complete freak of nature, an extraordinary deluge that almost came out of nowhere.”

Bligh’s claims are a desperate attempt to cover up the state’s criminal neglect of flood mitigation, its lack of management infrastructure and its green light to the construction of housing and other facilities in flood-prone areas (see: “Queensland crisis points to lack of flood mitigation and basic infrastructure”).

As weather forecasters, climatologists and flood management experts have explained over the past weeks, Queensland’s flood disaster, which is now flowing into the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales (NSW), was entirely predictable.

The same experts are now forecasting that severe weather patterns will continue this week, producing even heavier downpours on the already water-logged state. Combined with “king” tides tomorrow and on January 21 and releases from the rapidly filling Wivenhoe Dam, these weather patterns are expected to precipitate serious flooding in the state capital, Brisbane.

The Brisbane city council announced yesterday that

over 450 properties, particularly in the city's low-lying Rocklea, Albion, Milton and Auchenflower areas, and 400 streets could be inundated on Wednesday. Brisbane's West End has already been affected and, if the floods worsen in the next few days, an additional 7,700 properties and surrounding land throughout the city could also be at risk, the council warned.

More than one million megalitres of water, the equivalent of two Sydney Harbours, is flowing into the Wivenhoe catchment every day, forcing SEQ Water to undertake the largest controlled releases in the facility's history.

Questions, however, are being asked as to whether the controlled releases, which are already producing floods in nearby communities, will be sufficient to deal with the massive amounts of water pouring into the catchment and to prevent a repeat of the destructive floods that deluged Brisbane in January 1974, killing 14 people and flooding almost 6,000 homes. According to University of Southern Queensland climatologist Professor Roger Stone, the current La Niña downpours are similar to the weather patterns that hit south eastern Queensland at that time.

Stone, who is also Australia's representative on the UN commission on climatology and agricultural meteorology, told ABC News today that the current La Niña, which began in May 2010, could continue beyond May this year, with even more disastrous consequences.

"There's still a fair way to go before we see the breakdown of the underlying cause of the whole problem. Sometimes they can go through to a second year, so when we get closer to May-June we'll have a better idea if this will continue on or whether it will do what we hope it will do and start to break down," he warned.

Along with the flash flooding in the Lockyer Valley, other Queensland towns and communities continue to be deluged. Gympie, 160 kilometres north of Brisbane, was cut in two when the Mary River rose 17 metres yesterday and inundated 50 homes and a similar number of businesses. On Sunday, the town was hit by 300 millimetres of rain.

Over 1,500 residents from the Maryborough suburb of Granville have been cut off from the town since Saturday, whilst residents in towns like Dalby have been evacuated from their flooded homes for the

second time in three weeks. About 100 homes were evacuated from Dalby on December 27, but local authorities warned yesterday that "significantly more" would be flooded as the river rises to even higher levels.

The increasing number of Queensland towns suffering serious flood damage and having road and rail connections cut off is producing major shortages of perishable food. Granville residents, for example, face shortages of bread and milk and other essential items, despite recent helicopter and ferry drops.

"We are trying to keep people calm but it's only Monday and businesses are already running out of food ... because we can't get through to Brisbane," the Fraser Coast mayor told the local media. And in Gympie, about 50 kilometres south of Granville, baker Cathy Moore said she could not keep up with demand. She told the *Gympie Times*: "It's absolute bedlam. We get the bread out and then it's gone."

While over 200,000 in Queensland have been affected by these disastrous events, north eastern NSW is also facing major inundation with flood alerts issued for the Richmond, Wilsons and Brunswick valleys. Four thousand people in NSW have been isolated, as several towns west of Casino in northern New South Wales—Tabulam, Bonalbo, Old Bonalbo, and Urbenville—were isolated by floodwaters yesterday, the second time in a fortnight.



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