

Queensland flood chief Major-General Mick Slater issues ominous warning

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Following authorisation by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, current Australian army Major-General Mick Slater was last week appointed head of the Queensland Flood Recovery Taskforce, after an emergency cabinet meeting of the state Labor government.

The taskforce, Queensland Premier Anna Bligh said, would focus on rebuilding homes, regional centres and infrastructure. Within days, however, Major-General Slater, who has served in East Timor, Kuwait and Indonesia, issued an ominous public warning to the media.

Slater's comments came following a fly-in visit to the flood-ravaged city of Rockhampton, 630 kilometres north of Brisbane. After praising the efforts of local residents and emergency workers, he turned his attention to the media and its response to the unfolding flood disaster.

"All the ingredients for success are there. The people who have been affected, the civic leaders in each of those communities, want success. The state and federal governments are working towards success," he declared. "There is no reason why we won't have it, unless we start getting bored with the story and the media start to become divisive within the community and then, if there are areas of failure, I think I could find the reason and track it back to areas of the media."

Slater's comments, which were not challenged by any of the assembled journalists, contained a clear, and chilling threat. Translated into plain English, the senior military chief was ordering media representatives to shut their eyes to, and censor any reportage of, the catastrophic lack of government foresight and preparation, the grossly under-funded and inadequate civilian emergency services, and the refusal of state and federal authorities to seriously assist the hundreds of

thousands of Queenslanders whose homes have been inundated or destroyed.

Exposure of any aspect of the bitter reality will not be tolerated. If criticism and protest begin to develop, it will be the fault, not of the ineptitude, failures and contempt of state and federal governments toward ordinary people, but of those who reveal what has really taken place.

Slater's anti-democratic attack on press freedom is unmistakable and deeply hostile to what journalists should be doing—conducting entirely independent coverage of government and the business interests they serve; investigating and analysing "without fear or favour"; and honestly reporting on the social reality facing ordinary people.

As far as the media was concerned, Slater had little cause for concern. The corporate media maintains strict self-censorship, and has bent over backwards to praise federal and state government responses to the catastrophe, and to cover over their refusal to establish adequate flood management and mitigation measures or provide the civilian emergency service with the resources they desperately need.

Slater's comments, however, make clear why the Gillard and Bligh governments appointed the major-general in the first place.

The so-called Flood Recovery Taskforce is a strictly organised military operation. Orders are given and people are expected to unquestioningly fall into line. Its primary purpose is not to restore normal life for the hundreds of thousands of flood victims, but to prioritise the rapid implementation of corporate and financial recovery demands.

At a more fundamental level, Slater's warnings reflect acute nervousness within Australia's political elite at the prospect of mounting popular anger over the

role of governments, developers, insurance companies and other major corporate interests in creating the conditions for the flooding disaster.

Just five years ago, in March 2006, Cyclone Larry destroyed the homes and livelihoods of thousands of Queensland residents. When that catastrophe left thousands without housing, food or money, the media began reporting on the growing anger of cyclone victims. Millions of viewers saw television footage of hundreds of Innisfail residents lining up for emergency relief and jeering then Prime Minister John Howard and then-Queensland Premier Peter Beattie, who were visiting the town.

Fearing a popular movement against the government's unpreparedness and totally inadequate response—and concerned that associations were beginning to be made with the Bush administration's contemptuous indifference to the plight of New Orleans residents following Hurricane Katrina just six months earlier—the state and federal governments pleaded with Queensland residents to be “calm and patient”.

The media obliged. Images and voices of angry cyclone victims were removed from television screens and newspaper front pages, and replaced with commentary praising the great “Australian spirit” of “mateship and resilience”, along with calls for a “lowering of public expectations”. An op-ed comment in the erstwhile “liberal” *Sydney Morning Herald* denounced cyclone victims as “whingeing consumers”, who should “get over” the situation because Innisfail was “not New Orleans”.

Five years later, the situation in Queensland is truly devastating. Since November, almost 30 people have been killed in floods that have ravaged two-thirds of the state, scores are missing, feared dead, and close to a million residents have been directly affected.

With such levels of destruction and human misery, mass anger and opposition will inevitably emerge. Slater's comments are aimed, above all, at sending a message that the new task force is already preparing to defend government authorities and stifle any oppositional movement.

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