

Cyclone Yasi causes extensive damage across north eastern Australia

Mike Head
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Cyclone Yasi, the first category 5 storm to hit the Australian coast since 1918, devastated a series of small towns in north Queensland overnight. Homes have been ripped apart, roofs torn off, power and communications cut and crops flattened. The extent of the damage remains unclear because emergency crews were this morning still cutting their way into the worst-hit towns of Cardwell, Mission Beach and Silkwood.

While no lives have been reported lost, an unknown number of people remained in some of these seaside communities, where the storm surge had been forecast to rise to seven metres. Accounts have begun to emerge of severe damage. Winds of up to 290 kilometres per hour tore off the roofs or damaged up to half the homes in the town of Tully and caused heavy destruction in the nearby resort centre of Mission Beach. A full picture may take some time to form, as telecommunications have been cut to many areas and 175,000 homes have no electricity.

At its height, the massive cyclone covered an area bigger than Italy or New Zealand and its strength was on a par with Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005. Downgraded to a category 2 storm after it crossed the coast, Yasi is continuing to cause tidal surges and torrential rains. Its impact is expected to be felt as far west as the mining centre of Mount Isa, 800 kilometres inland, where it is still predicted to be a category 1 storm by 8 p.m. local time. Substantial flooding has been experienced in many centres along the coast, with 400 millimetres of rain falling in less than 24 hours.

Many of the 400,000 people living in the path of the 500-kilometre wide cyclone spent a sleepless night. Officially, 35,000 people were evacuated in the region from Cairns to Townsville.

There were many accounts of people banding together to protect and assist each other, including by taking residents from low-lying areas or less-sturdy houses into

their homes to shelter. The official response, however, was marked by inadequate facilities and callous indifference toward those, including the elderly, indigenous communities and residents of low-lying, often poorer, areas, who failed or were unable to evacuate in time.

Fortunately, the two main cities in the region, Townsville and Cairns, with more than 350,000 people between them, were spared the worst of the storm front. Had the cyclone directly hit either city, more extensive damage would have been likely.

Yesterday, there were scenes of dismay as people were turned away from evacuation centres in Cairns. Residents were officially told around lunch time that all seven of the city's cyclone shelters were full and that they should simply stay in their homes and "batten down". At the Earlville shopping mall, which served as a shelter, police guarded the entry to keep people out as grey clouds swirled and winds whistled over rooftops. Selwyn Hughes, who stood outside with his five children, aged two to 13, and about 80 other people in an uncovered car park, told Reuters: "There are so many of us here. Surely they have to do something, find somewhere safer to move us to before it arrives."

Around 30,000 people in low-lying suburbs of Cairns had left their homes and poured into the centres when doors had opened at about 6 a.m. yesterday. Kellie MacKenzie, who was among 2,000 residents inside the Earlville mall, told the ABC that other members of her family had been turned away and would wait out the cyclone in her sister's brick apartment. "I thought we packed up and were prepared fairly well. Unfortunately half my crew came here and the other half were turned away because the place was full," she said.

At a media conference, Queensland Premier Anna Bligh defended the actions of the police, even though the government's 20 evacuation centres throughout the

region could only take 10,600 of the 75,000 people regarded as being in immediate danger from hurricane-force winds and coastal ocean surges. “You can’t accommodate 75,000 people in these sorts of shelters, that could never happen, you always need to expect that some people will be sheltering in their own homes,” she said.

Bligh and state disaster coordinator Ian Stewart later told a media briefing that six residents of Port Hinchinbrook, all in their mid-60s, who had made an emergency call asking to be evacuated from a threatening storm surge, were “on their own”. Stewart accused the group of not heeding earlier warnings to evacuate. Bligh flatly declared that many more such distress calls were likely. “The people who answer our phones, they’ll be doing it tough tonight,” she stated.

Earlier, Bligh defended the refusal of authorities to evacuate Palm Island’s 3,500 mostly indigenous people, even though three of the island’s shelters were within the tidal surge zone. Nearby tourist resort islands had been evacuated but not Palm Island. Former island mayor Robert Blackley had told the media: “Ninety percent of the houses are built in the surge zone. These communities were never planned . . . The housing is sub-standard, there’s too (much) missile debris and the preparedness is lacking.”

Challenged at a media briefing, Bligh conceded that Palm Island was one of the communities that would “bear the brunt of the winds and particularly the storm surge,” but claimed: “All the planning that can be done on Palm Island for that storm surge has been done.”

Prime Minister Julia Gillard declared that her government stood with the people of north Queensland, but emphasised that any federal government assistance would be financed by painful budget cuts, on top of the \$3.8 billion in cuts she announced last week to pay for economic infrastructure repair from the recent floods disaster. “I suspect when we make cutbacks in other areas to support the rebuilding, there will be people who aren’t very happy about where the cutbacks are made,” she said.

The Queensland floods and now the cyclone are being exploited to bring forward cuts to education, housing affordability and other social spending to meet the demands of the international financial markets for the elimination by 2012-13 of the deficit created by the 2008-09 global financial crisis. Federal payments for cyclone victims will remain at the same contemptible levels as for the floods: \$1,000 per adult and \$400 per child for people evacuated from their homes or whose homes are seriously damaged.

Gillard said the 4,000 troops based at Townsville barracks would be deployed for cyclone rescue and repair operations, underscoring the lack of adequate civil emergency services.

The drive for private profit has contributed to many aspects of the disaster. Because of a lack of services and high ticket prices, many residents were unable to get flights or trains out of Cairns and Townsville. In Cairns, some residents said they could not afford to leave the city because the cost of flights to Brisbane soared to \$1,500 in the final hours before the airport closed yesterday. In Townsville, airlines set ticket prices of around \$600.

Just before the storm hit, the major insurance companies made it plain that their flood and cyclone insurance policies would not cover storm surges caused by Yasi. Rob Whelan of the Insurance Council of Australia told the *Australian Financial Review*: “Homes damaged by wind or rain, if they’re insured they’ll be covered—but if it’s tidal inundation or actions of the sea through tidal surge, then no.” This follows the earlier refusal of the insurance giants, such as AAMI, NRMA and Allianz, to cover the “river floods” that occurred in Brisbane and throughout southern Queensland.

The financial newspaper also reported that some insurers had pulled out of the north Queensland market in recent months, leading to a two-month embargo by insurance brokers, and predictions that premiums for existing customers could rise by 350 percent. Apartment owners and small business operators said they had been unable to obtain insurance.

Few reports have appeared of the cyclone’s earlier damage to southern parts of Solomon Islands and northern islands of Vanuatu. Even though Yasi was a slightly weaker, category 3 cyclone at that stage, wind gusts of up to 125 kilometres an hour hit the 2,000 residents of Rennell Island in the Solomons.



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