

Full extent of Australian cyclone disaster emerges

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The extent of the damage caused by tropical cyclone Yasi, the category 5 storm that hit north-eastern Australia last week, became clearer over the weekend as residents battled through floods and blocked roads to return to their destroyed homes in coastal communities. With tens of thousands of homes still without electricity and water supplies, the inadequacy of the official cyclone preparations and subsequent relief operations is also being revealed.

The death toll stands at one, with numbers of people still missing. A young man, 23, died near Ingham. He suffocated after using a generator inside a closed room when the cyclone cut power supplies.

According to police and local government estimates, 150 homes have been demolished and about 1,200 damaged, including 650 considered uninhabitable. As a result, hundreds of families are homeless, mostly in relatively small towns and villages such as Innisfail, Tully, Tully Heads, Cardwell, Mission Beach, Silkwood and Port Hinchinbrook.

Some communities have been warned they will likely be without electricity for weeks, making even more difficult the rebuilding of shattered homes and lives. To make matters worse, hundreds of banana plantation workers and other rural labourers face prolonged unemployment because of the flattening of banana, sugar cane, avocado and other crops.

An estimated \$1 billion worth of harvests has been lost, while damage to local government infrastructure is thought to exceed \$1 billion. Catastrophe modeller EQECAT, whose calculations are relied upon by insurance companies, put the total damage bill across northern Queensland and the Northern Territory at \$5 billion.

Yasi was the largest cyclone to cross the Queensland coast for nearly 100 years. Remarkably, three factors combined to prevent greater destruction. The major

population centres of Cairns and Townsville were largely spared; Yasi arrived at low tide, lessening the impact of tidal surges; it moved inland at an unusually fast speed of 35 km/h, reducing the stress on buildings of its near 300 km/h wind gusts.

Such luck may not continue. The Bureau of Meteorology has warned that three or four similar such storms are possible before the end of the cyclone season in April, due to the La Niña weather pattern and exceptionally warm seas.

An extraordinary PR and media campaign has been mounted to declare the official disaster response a success and boost the credibility of Queensland Premier Anna Bligh, who conducted frequent media briefings and appearances throughout the disaster. According to the Murdoch media's Claire Harvey, Bligh is "emerging from the political storm as an inspiring and empathetic leader".

Prime Minister Julia Gillard sought to capitalise on the crisis as well by flying north to inspect the damage and be photographed surrounded by some of the 4,000 military troops that her government has deployed for relief operations.

Beneath the PR veneer, however, the conduct of both state and federal Labor governments has been dominated by life-threatening neglect, contempt for flood victims and a cynical acceleration of plans for savage budget cuts.

Most of the government's evacuation centres—which could take only about 11,000 of the estimated 75,000 people who were instructed to evacuate—were not cyclone-rated. This was despite promises by Bligh's predecessor, Peter Beattie, to build cyclone shelters in every community from Cape York to Bundaberg after Cyclone Larry devastated Innisfail in 2006.

Several evacuees came close to losing their lives. The shelter in Tully—a 1950s weatherboard senior citizens' hall—was demolished by the winds. The two families that

had been sheltering there were saved by a local Red Cross co-ordinator, who decided the building could not be trusted, and took them to an alternative, safer venue.

Just hours before the cyclone struck last Wednesday night, the local Cassowary Coast council warned that the Tully hall and another evacuation centre at the Innisfail Shire Hall might not withstand the hurricane-strength winds. Mayor Bill Shannon urged residents to try to find refuge with friends and family instead. The only local building designed to resist a Category-5 cyclone was the new Innisfail State High School hall. It had closed its doors by 8.30am, however, crammed with 500 residents.

At a media briefing, Bligh arrogantly defended the fact that five years after Beattie's pledge, only three cyclone-proof shelters had been built—the Innisfail school hall, a hall sheltering 1,000 people at Redlynch State School in Cairns, and a Returned and Services League hall in Babinda. "The commitment was, as we build the things that are necessary like school halls, where people could take shelter, we will build them to a category-5 level," she said. "But 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."

After Cyclone Larry and a cyclone summit in 2006, the Labor government also promised to consider implementing a mass alert system capable of sending automated messages with area-specific updates. Later, however, the government adopted a national automated message system, which sent out only four alerts: one alert told residents to evacuate only 45 minutes before Bligh announced it was too late for them to leave.

As Yasi loomed, evacuation centres had to be hastily arranged, including the Earlville Shopping Centre in Cairns, with its owners only contacted 24 hours prior to the storm. In Townsville, population 180,000, the city council opened five "last-resort" refuges for those with nowhere else to shelter, including backpackers, caravan park residents and the homeless. Council spokesman Tony Wode warned that the centres were not cyclone-proof. "We don't want people going to these centres unless they have absolutely no other option," he said.

Over the weekend, as residents returned to Cardwell, one of the most devastated townships, some spoke out. Lauren Lovell, whose home had its roof partly torn off, told reporters: "We had local politicians on the radio telling us the safest place to be was in our home. And virtually at the same time, at about 10.30 on Wednesday morning, police cars were driving up and down the streets

... telling people there was a mandatory evacuation. But there were no local shelters and the police could only tell us to go to Innisfail or Cairns, and hopefully the shelters wouldn't be full there."

Nevertheless, Bligh publicly condemned residents who refused or failed to leave their homes, and insinuated that they would be responsible for any deaths that occurred. As the cyclone hit, she and state disaster coordinator Ian Stewart 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, could not be rescued. Bligh went on to assert they had not heeded earlier warnings to evacuate.

On her visit to Townsville, Gillard claimed she had come to "offer some words of reassurance and talk to people about how we're going to rebuild". In reality, as with the \$5.6 billion floods package, the government's contribution will be completely inadequate to reconstruct communities, provide decent social infrastructure and establish proper disaster facilities.

Gillard once again made clear that any federal government contribution would be financed by making "some very tough decisions" to slash spending elsewhere. Gillard has already exploited last month's floods disaster to bring forward \$3.8 billion in cuts to education, housing and social programs, thus satisfying financial market demands to eliminate by 2012-13 the budget deficit.

Gillard's other main message was to announce the biggest military deployment for a natural disaster since Cyclone Tracy destroyed Darwin in 1974—exceeding the mobilisation of 1,500 troops for Brisbane's floods. The greater than ever use of soldiers for disaster relief not only underscores the lack of sufficient civil emergency services; it extends the ongoing militarisation of society. Army commander, Major-General Mick Slater, who has been placed in charge of the recovery operation, has warned the media and residents against voicing dissatisfaction. Moreover, soldiers have been involved in domestic policing and the military has taken control of entire communities, such as Grantham in Brisbane's Lockyer Valley.



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