

Worker killed in New Zealand tornado

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A 37-year-old construction worker, a father of two young children, was killed and 14 other people required hospital treatment when a 200-kilometre per hour tornado wreaked havoc in northern suburbs of New Zealand's largest city, Auckland, on Tuesday.

The twister hit Albany, about 15 kilometres north of Auckland Harbour, just before 3.00 p.m., ripping roofs off houses, shopping malls and commercial buildings, including in the suburb's busy retail centre. The sudden storm uprooted large trees and turned cars and a campervan on their sides. The Fire Service had responded to 65 events by the end of the day, but was still working to secure loose debris and cover damaged roofs with tarpaulins.

The man who died, Philippine immigrant Benedict Dacayan, worked for Fletcher Construction at the PlaceMakers building demolition site. He was hurled into the air by the winds and slammed into a concrete car park. A student nurse tried desperately to save his life.

The student, Sophie Bond, said she had tried to resuscitate Dacayan but it was too late. "There was a lot of blood and when we rolled him over to try and perform CPR we could see he had a very bad head wound," Bond said. She stayed with him before looking for other injured people to help. "Debris, metal and cars were flying through the air—they were just picked up and tossed around like it was nothing and thrown back down," Bond added.

Fletcher chief executive Mark Binns said the PlaceMakers site was "devastated" when the tornado hit it "smack on". The site superintendent was outside and his leg was badly gashed by falling metal. A subcontractor working on the site was also seriously injured and is in Auckland Hospital. Among others with major injuries were several children. A five-month-old girl and two other children were injured when their car was turned upside down, its windscreen smashed

and bonnet ripped off.

The death toll could have been far worse. The tornado tore through two major retail malls, Westfield's Albany Mall and the Albany Mega Centre, and across a motorway, and dumped debris on a school, Glenfield College. Doubts surrounded the number of homes damaged, with Civil Defence officials putting the figure at 23, while insurance companies estimated that up to 50 homes had been affected, including in Birkenhead, more than 10 kilometres from Albany. At least one house has been declared uninhabitable.

Weather and climate experts estimated from video images that the tornado had a force of 2 on a zero-to-5-point scale. While considerably smaller than the category-5 tornadoes that devastated southern parts of the US last week, the twister caused serious damage.

Witnesses interviewed by the media described the terrifying events. Anna Downie told the *New Zealand Herald* she watched from a hill as roof after roof was ripped off homes she knew; Richard Turner stood "awestruck" as the tornado picked up cars, flinging them skyward; Helena Campbell returned to her car to find it crushed and 100 metres away from where it had been parked. Ashley Abbott grabbed her two children under her arm out from the path of the tornado, tossing them into her bathroom away from glass; three children screamed and cowered in Jane Grayson's car as a howling grey wall thrashed across it.

Residents were stunned because no official warnings had been issued before the storm. Road closures caused chaos with evening rush-hour traffic, more than 1,000 homes lost power and sirens of emergency vehicles blared across the city.

Cordons and police remained in Albany on Wednesday, with debris from buildings and wrecked cars still lying at the Mega Centre. Roads into the shopping mall's car park remained closed with police on guard. Retail workers lined up along the road next to

the mall waiting to hear when they would be allowed back to work.

The tornado reportedly caught weather forecasters, as well as the government and emergency services, by surprise, even though New Zealand's meteorological agency MetService had been prepared for thunderstorms—a necessary condition for twisters. MetService forecaster Andy Downs told the *Herald* that lower-atmosphere winds detected by weather balloons sent up before the tornado did not appear to be rotating enough for such an event to develop.

Media reports described the tornado as a “freak”. In reality, New Zealand is hit by 20 tornado events each year, although they are typically narrow and short-lived. Tornadoes hit Auckland every two or three years and previous incidents have included damage to buildings and power lines. In May 1991, a tornado struck Albany, lifting roofing iron from homes and destroying a small church on the south-western side of the suburb. One man died when debris spread by the tornado hit him while he was driving a bulldozer.

Elsewhere in New Zealand, in August 2004 a tornado destroyed a house in Taranaki, killing its two occupants. Swarms of tornadoes struck the province of Taranaki over two days in July 2007, forcing people from their homes and causing about \$7 million worth of damage. One of New Zealand's worst tornadoes was in the city of Hamilton in 1948, when three people were killed.

Despite the death and injuries, the Fletcher company and the mall operators were anxious to assure investors that their operations would be barely affected. Fletcher Building investor relations manager Philip King said the business impact of the tornado was minimal. Westfield New Zealand, the owner of the Albany Mall, said it expected the bulk of its retail stores to reopen for business within days.

The Insurance Council of New Zealand said damage from the twister was likely to be “in the tens of millions of dollars,” but also reported that assessors had already found car owners who only had third-party insurance and residential property owners who did not have full insurance cover.

The official relief response was meagre. Auckland City Council established an evacuation centre but closed it down a day later after officials reported that residents had found shelter with relatives or friends.

In a perfunctory media appearance, Prime Minister John Key said he was closely watching the situation in Auckland, but did not immediately visit the area, instead dispatching a local government parliamentarian. Key said he had left a message of support for Auckland Mayor Len Brown “offering any support the government may be able to offer the people of Auckland.” No such measures have been announced, however. There has been no suggestion of welfare payments to aid those whose homes have been damaged or employment affected.

For his part, Mayor Brown said Albany was a strong community and had rallied round those who had suffered injuries or damage to property. He sought to invoke the “spirit” of the response to the two recent earthquakes in Christchurch, the second of which claimed more than 180 lives in February. “It’s the same spirit that we have seen in Christchurch. People are helping, they are pulling together,” he said.

Under the cover of similar appeals in Christchurch—designed to shift the burden of recovery onto individuals—many working class earthquake victims have been effectively abandoned by the government. The Key government's inadequate and temporary earthquake relief measures have left broad layers of working class families facing a social disaster in Christchurch, following the loss of their homes and livelihoods.

The author recommends:

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