

Australia: Chaotic official response during Queensland flood emergency

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Testimony at the Queensland floods inquiry over the past week and a half has graphically exposed the grossly inadequate official response to the floods that engulfed the northern-eastern Australian state in late December and January. Seventy towns and the state capital Brisbane were inundated, 35 people killed, thousands of homes destroyed, and mining, agriculture and other key industries brought to a halt.

The response of state authorities was chaotic, leaving tens of thousands of people to fend for themselves. Testimony from helicopter pilots, water rescue workers and flood victims alike revealed that Queensland's disaster management system failed to protect ordinary people.

Helicopter pilot Mark Kempton, who rescued 28 people from rooftops and trees in Grantham, broke down in tears while testifying. He explained that more flood victims could have been saved in the Lockyer Valley town if his helicopter had been equipped with better tracking and winch systems and ready access to fuel.

Kempton's helicopter was so antiquated that his crew had to rely on an Apple iPhone for navigation. Grantham residents received no official warnings before they were hit by a massive wall of water on January 10, killing 17 people.

Brent Hall, another helicopter pilot, told the inquiry that his helicopter and crew were available on January 10, but were not asked to assist. In fact, scores of emergency service workers in the Lockyer Valley were left standing idle as the floods swept through the small community.

Firefighter and trained swift-water rescuer Ian Bland explained that he and three other emergency service workers had returned to the Grantham area from flood-relief duties in central Queensland on January 10. But he was told at 6.30 p.m. on January 10—as scores of residents fought for their lives—that his team was “not required” and the situation was “under control.”

Queensland Fire Rescue Service station officer Mark Stephenson said emergency services in Lockyer Valley were

desperately understaffed and “badly organised”.

A day before Grantham was engulfed, Stephenson pleaded with his superiors for six extra personnel because only one other person was rostered to work on January 10. He was given one additional person but when he visited the incident control centre in nearby Gatton he was shocked to find “a large pool of firefighters basically standing around waiting tasking.”

In Lowood, about 65 kilometres west of Brisbane, police officer Darren Rumbelow and paramedics tried to organise a helicopter evacuation of two seriously injured men who had been electrocuted in floodwaters. When the state authorities rejected their appeals, local officials, fearing the men would die, decided to use a four-wheel drive vehicle to transport them to Ipswich hospital. The 30-kilometre journey took over three hours, during which the vehicle narrowly escaped being engulfed in a landslide.

After flood waters began engulfing Brisbane suburbs on January 11, the media and the state government claimed that the city's residents had been warned. But the inquiry was told that the Brisbane City Council had only 19,000 subscribers to its SMS early warning service in the sprawling city of over two million.

Under cross examination, the council's regional operations manager Sean Hodgson revealed that on January 11 council staff, basing themselves on flood predictions, door-knocked 10,000 households and small businesses, warning residents that their properties were at risk of flooding. The predicted number of inundated properties, however, was tripled later that day to 30,000 after Wivenhoe Dam operators began releasing water at 12,000 cubic metres per second. Hodgson told the inquiry that it was “impossible” to warn the additional property holders at such late notice.

Brisbane City Council CEO Colin Jensen also admitted under cross examination that the council's website crashed “several times” during the flood, preventing residents from accessing information on the disaster and the location of evacuation centres.

The Wivenhoe Dam releases immediately inundated nearby residents. Wivenhoe Pocket, a community of about 450 people about two kilometres downstream, was cut off for days. Resident Paul Heymans told the inquiry that he was “stunned” at the lack of preparation for the January disaster. Wivenhoe Pocket, he said, had no local warning system, the only SES SMS alert on the day was ambiguous, and there was “no input from the SES [State Emergency Services]” during the flood.

Heymans described how he tried to get emergency assistance to rescue an 84-year-old woman and her relatives trapped in their flooded home. He called the triple zero emergency number but was referred to the SES, which told him to try calling triple-zero again. He passed on all the relevant details but he was not contacted for five days. The family was eventually rescued by another resident using a kayak.

Wivenhoe Pocket’s Rural Fire Brigade chairman Graham Peall stated in a submission that the local brigade had received no assistance from the federal, state or local governments. The community had been given no choice, he said, but to “go it alone”. Inadequate information had been provided about road closures, evacuation points and food and medical supplies. After the flood the community had been left to do its own clean-up.

Further down river, 25,000 residents in the Brisbane suburbs of Moggill, Bellbowrie and Karana Downs residents were inundated and isolated for four days. Retired army officer Graham Barnard told the inquiry there was no disaster management plan for Moggill and although the SES had “done well under difficult circumstances,” it was hamstrung by a lack of resources.

Barnard said he had “great difficulty” in trying to arrange emergency supplies from state government and disaster co-ordination centre officials. “They seemed obstructive in my attempts to get essential supplies,” he said in a written statement.

Under questioning, Barnard said he had received numerous phone calls from the disaster recovery centre asking why the community needed supplies. “I don’t think [these] people really understood that we were cut off,” he said. “People hadn’t appreciated that we were literally stranded, we were an island out there.”

North Pine residents in the Moreton Bay Regional Council area, just outside Brisbane, were not warned about increased water releases from the North Pine Dam. The dam’s operator, SEQWater, had rejected repeated requests by residents’ association president Peter Hackney for a copy of the dam’s

operational manual. Hackney asked the inquiry to release pre-2007 versions of the manual, which he claimed included a flood mitigation component that has been deleted from later manuals.

Flood victims continue to denounce the lack of financial assistance from the Queensland state government. So far, only \$70 million of the \$256 million donated to the Premier’s Disaster Relief Appeal has been distributed to flood victims. John Tyson, whose wife Donna Rice and son Jordan were killed by flash flooding in Toowoomba, told ABC Radio last week that he felt “used” by Premier Anna Bligh and Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Both leaders, Tyson said, had met him at media events but did not really care about the plight of the flood victims. “They’ve grandstood on the whole thing, used it for political gain. And when it comes to the people, they’ve just put all that aside and just kicked back and continued on with their life. [They’ve] cried plenty of crocodile tears. But if they were genuine tears they would be still be doing things,” he said.

Peter Callaghan, counsel assisting the inquiry, stated last week that local governments were on the “frontline” of disaster management in Queensland. But it is increasingly evident that the state government’s three-tiered Disaster Management Structure, which devolves emergency management to regional and local authorities, was an evasion of responsibility. It was simply impossible for many local councils, particularly smaller ones, to develop effective responses to the disaster. Lockyer Valley council, for example, has an annual disaster management budget of just \$5,000.

Callaghan admitted that many communities had to “help themselves because there was simply no-one else around”. He insisted, however, that the inquiry was “not a forum for blame.”

This last comment suggests that the inquiry is aimed at acting as a safety valve for widespread public anger, rather than holding federal and state governments accountable for inadequate disaster planning and the rundown of emergency services that worsened the flood catastrophe.



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