

# Thousands evacuated as floods hit north-eastern Australia

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7 February 2012

Twelve months after flooding devastated Queensland and parts of northern New South Wales (NSW), record rainfall has again struck north-eastern Australia, engulfing towns, killing a young mother and forcing thousands to evacuate their communities. Jane Sheahan died in Roma, Queensland on Friday after being swept from her car just after she handed her seven-year-old son Darcy to rescuers.

Over 20,000 people in towns and settlements on both sides of the Queensland-NSW border have been isolated during the past week by swollen rivers, most of them Darling River tributaries. Thousands of the victims were still struggling to recover financially and psychologically from last year's deluge.

Like the 2011 flood catastrophe, the downpours are caused by the La Niña weather pattern, which produces a build up of warmer water along Australia's east coast and drags in moist air and heavy rains. According to the Bureau of Meteorology, while the rain is expected to lessen over the next weeks, it could persist until April.

Inundated Queensland communities include Mitchell, with just under 1,000 people, which has over 280 damaged homes, many of them totally underwater. Roma (population 6,000) has about 400 flooded houses, and St George (population 2,800) currently has 50 badly damaged homes.

During January 2011, Mitchell resident Jeremy Eyles was living in the Lockyer Valley, near Brisbane, when 18 people were killed in flash flooding. He moved to Mitchell late last year, after his marriage broke down. He told the *Australian* newspaper that financial pressures caused by last year's floods became a major

factor in the breakdown. The latest deluge, he said, would have a long-term impact on Mitchell residents. "I've been through this before. This drags on for months."

Nearby St George is now on "a knife edge" according to emergency authorities. Residents face serious damage if the Balooone River breaches a makeshift 14.5-metre high levee on the northern side of the town. Last weekend, residents were ordered to leave St George, the largest ever compulsory evacuation from a Queensland town. An estimated 300 residents refused to leave the community, however, hoping to protect their properties.

Across the border in northern NSW, over 15,000 people have been isolated by deluged roads and bridges over the past ten days and more than 300 homes seriously inundated. So far, over 7,000 people have been evacuated from towns and farms. Helicopters are conducting rescue operations and dropping food and medical supplies. NSW State Emergency Service commissioner Murray Kear told the media on Sunday that the floods would continue moving across the state throughout February.

Last week, the swollen Mehi River forced the evacuation of more than 2,000 people from Moree, and about 700 residents in nearby Pallamallawa and Biniguy. Most of Moree's residents returned to their homes yesterday. Other northern NSW towns inundated include Mungindi, Gunnedah, Wee Waa, Boggoabri, Narrabri, Bugilbone, Goangra and Carinda.

These areas produce most of Australia's cotton. Growers could lose 10 percent of what was expected to

be \$2.75-billion crop this year. Australia is the world's third-largest shipper of cotton. Sugarcane, soybean and corn crops and the beef industry have also been hit.

AgForce Cattle president Grant Maudsley said farming families "are facing major clean-ups of their homes, but they are also confronted with the daunting and costly task of rebuilding fences and infrastructure swept away by the floods."

Flood relief, however, is grossly insufficient. The NSW Liberal government has called for federal assistance to flood-affected residents. The Queensland Labor government of Premier Anna Bligh has donated just \$2 million to the Premier's Disaster Relief Appeal and offered personal hardship grants of just \$180 per person, and up to \$900 for a family.

A miserable amount has been provided by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard: a one-off, \$1,000 payment for adults and \$400 for each child. These amounts, available only in designated flood areas, will do nothing to restore homes, let alone compensate for the loss of work and income.

Like last year's floods, which killed 35 people and inundated over 25,000 homes, people have been heavily dependent on volunteers and non-government services. Despite extensive media coverage of the latest floods, there has been silence about the budget-cutting measures and other political factors that have magnified the catastrophe.

Government promises to flood-proof road and transport links have not materialised and town residents are still living on dangerous flood plains. Flood mitigation programs and emergency services remain under funded, while many regional cities and towns have not been flood-mapped.

Calls by flood mitigation engineers and scientists for the construction of dams, retarding basins, channel levees and other flood reduction infrastructure have been ignored by state and federal governments. Residents in many flood-prone areas have had to build their own makeshift levees.

Meanwhile, the official inquiry into last year's Queensland floods has begun re-examining witnesses about flaws and omissions in reports by SEQWater, which operates Wivenhoe Dam, north-west of Brisbane.

The investigation, which was due to present a final report this month, was suddenly resumed and its report delayed until mid-March after news reports revealed the discrepancies. The engineers who managed dam releases during the floods have been accused of not following the facility's operating manual. Over 20,000 homes in Brisbane and Ipswich were inundated following massive water releases from Wivenhoe Dam.

Media reports also provoked questions about the failure of previous inquiry hearings to notice glaring contradictions in the official reports, and how much the Bligh government knew about the dam's operations during last year's floods. (See: "New flood evidence delays Queensland election")

Yesterday it was revealed that Premier Bligh ordered an urgent "independent review" on January 11, 2011, as it became apparent that engineers had lost their ability to protect Ipswich and Brisbane from flooding. Bligh has always claimed that she had no working knowledge of the dam's operations during the floods. The government then announced that two SEQWater engineers were no longer working at the dam and were "not available until further notice." No explanation has been provided.

Yesterday's developments are another indication that, contrary to government claims, little, if anything, has been done to protect thousands of ordinary people from current and future flooding disasters.



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