

Australia: Floods inundate rural communities

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More than 16,000 people have been evacuated, hundreds of homes inundated and two men killed, swept from their cars, after record rains hit rural towns and farms in the Australian states of New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Queensland in the past seven days.

The downpours, caused by an ongoing La Niña weather pattern, follow inundations in early February in Queensland and northern NSW, and catastrophic floods in 2010-2011 that killed 35 people and seriously damaged over 25,000 homes in Queensland.

In NSW, more than 13,000 people have been ordered to evacuate during the past week. Over 1,000 homes have been badly damaged, with some settlements recording more than 400 mm, or 16 inches, of rain late last week. Flash flooding occurred in Sydney today, quickly causing road closures and traffic chaos. Last Friday, Warragamba Dam, northwest of Sydney, overflowed for the first time in 18 years, forcing 1,900 people to be evacuated from the lower reaches of the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley.

The flooding has mainly impacted rural towns and farming communities along the Murray, Darling and Murrumbidgee valleys, Australia's largest river system. The area accounts for 39 percent of the country's agricultural production and about 10 percent of its population.

About 9,000 residents of Wagga Wagga (population 47,000) were ordered to leave their homes as the Murrumbidgee River rose to 10.6 metres—the worst flooding in the district since 1853. While 11-metre local levees, built in the early 1960s, narrowly prevented flooding in the central business district, over 240 homes in the city's north are under a metre of water.

Residents of nearby Urana (pop. 400) were evacuated by air after floodwaters threatened sewerage and electricity, while 120 residents of Gundagai were

ordered from their homes. On Tuesday, 600 people were evacuated from Griffith, North Yenda and Beelbangera, where hundreds of hectares of grape, citrus and rice crops were inundated. Also, on Tuesday, about 1,000 people were evacuated from Forbes (pop. 6,900), about 370 kilometres west of Sydney, on the Lachlan River, a Murrumbidgee tributary.

Flooding is expected to continue throughout this month as the water makes its way down the Murrumbidgee and Darling rivers into the Murray. Flooding is predicted today at Narrandera and on March 22 in Hay, when the river is expected to reach 9 metres. Hay's levees are only 8.1 metres high.

In north-east Victoria, south of the Murray River, many communities, some still recovering from floods in September 2010 and early 2011, were deluged.

Many roads north of Shepparton and Wangaratta were impassable, with residents of Numurkah, Katamatite, Walwa, Tallygaroopna and Tungamah the worst affected. These communities could remain cut off for weeks. Walwa residents were ordered to leave their homes via an emergency alert at 2 a.m. on Monday. Residents of Nathalia (pop 1,400) were told at 4 a.m. today to evacuate their homes amid fears that temporary aluminium levees had begun to be breached.

Water is now receding from Numurkah (pop. 4,600) but the local hospital was damaged after floods engulfed x-ray rooms and operating theatres. Army vehicles were used to transport patients to Wangaratta and Shepparton.

Desperate attempts are being made by emergency authorities and local residents on both sides of the Victorian-NSW border to bolster levees or create sandbag structures to hold back the water.

While there is 24/7 media coverage of the catastrophe, there is little reportage on how it will affect communities that have not recovered from recent flooding and depressed agricultural commodity prices,

which are driving up unemployment and poverty in rural communities.

The media has said nothing about the inadequate government response and the failure of state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National coalition alike, to provide the necessary resources for levees and other flood control measures.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard made a perfunctory visit to Wagga Wagga yesterday, feigning concern for flood victims, but offering no new funding. Instead, she assured the financial markets that any government assistance would not jeopardise her administration's pledge to deliver a budget surplus in 2012-13.

As experts have regularly noted, flooding is the most expensive type of disaster in its consequences but the most manageable of all the natural hazards in Australia. Over the past three decades, federal and state government have reduced spending on flood control, insisting on "self-reliance"—i.e., cash-strapped local councils and residents are made responsible for their own flood mitigation.

During the 1980s, funding operated on a 2:2:1 basis—for every dollar spent by local councils, the state and federal governments would provide \$2 each. This arrangement was "restructured" in the mid-1990s to 1:1:1, which made it virtually impossible for local councils to maintain existing levees, some built over 50 years ago, let alone introduce new measures.

In 2005-06, federal government funding for the Regional Flood Mitigation Program (RFMP) and the Natural Disaster Mitigation Program (NDMP) was just \$24.6 million. During its last year in office, the Howard government abolished the RFMP and slashed NDMP funding to \$15.6 million.

After 2007, the Labor government shut down the NDMP and established a so-called Natural Disaster Resilience Program. Its annual budget, however, was only \$21.6 million to cover bushfire projects, cyclones, floods and other natural disasters. In other words, there is no serious funding for flood mitigation, or the construction of new levees, by-pass channels and detention basins, or buy-back schemes for flood-prone dwellings.

Large areas of settled Australia are not even flood mapped and governments continue to allow housing development on flood plains. According to current estimates, about 200,000 residential properties across

the country are in danger of inundation by 1 in a 100-year riverine flooding.

A parliamentary inquiry last year was told that Victoria's management of rivers and flood levees had been "haphazard", with no clear lines of responsibility for constructing and maintaining them. Levee building on the NSW and Victorian sides of the Murray River is not coordinated.

Likewise, government assistance to flood victims is a pittance. The Gillard government is providing a one-off \$1,000 payment for adults and \$400 for each child in designated flood areas; the NSW state government has offered just \$15,000 to flood damaged land holders. These amounts will do nothing to compensate for flood-damaged homes, or repair or restore equipment, fencing, crops and livestock.

No official statements have yet been made about the cost of the latest flooding but road repairs alone in NSW are already estimated at more than \$500 million. Like Gillard, the Victorian and NSW governments have pointed to their budget bottom lines, making clear that any emergency funding would be offset by spending cuts.

In January, flood expert Steven Molino told ABC Radio that Melbourne and Sydney and other cities were not prepared for the type of downpour that hit Brisbane in 2011. Major disasters were inevitable unless serious flood mitigation measures were implemented, he warned. These and other appeals by flood scientists will remain ignored by state and federal governments, whose policies are determined by the profit drives of land developers, insurance and construction companies and the banks.

Once again, the latest flooding makes clear that rational, scientific planning to provide a secure and safe environment is impossible under a system where corporate interests dominate every aspect of government and society.



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