

# Two cyclones devastate areas of northern and eastern Australia

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Hundreds of people have been left homeless and tens of thousands remain without power across both central Queensland and the Northern Territory in the wake of the impact of cyclones Marcia and Lam, which struck the two regions on February 22.

In the Northern Territory, the impact of the category four Cyclone Lam, which struck the northern area of Arnhem Land last Friday, has been disastrous. It has exacerbated the endemic poverty facing thousands of people, mainly Aboriginal, in the region.

Some of the worst-hit communities have been Ramingining, population 800, Mililingimbi, just off the coast of Arnhem Land, population 1,500, and Galiwinku, the main town on Elcho Island, population 2,000. The total damage there has been estimated at \$80 million.

The cyclone has highlighted the absence of basic infrastructure, including storm protection facilities, despite the region's tropical climate. Mililingimbi's cyclone shelter has a 300-person capacity—one fifth of the town population. Julie Turner, a resident, told the SBS that people were turned away from the shelter during the storm and directed back to their homes, unaware of what other buildings were cyclone-proof. "For me that's just not good enough," she said.

In Galiwinku, 250 people remain homeless, with more than 100 homes declared uninhabitable. They will be forced to stay in tent camps being set up on a local football oval. At a community meeting yesterday, they were told it could be up to two months before they can return to their homes, many of which were constructed using asbestos, a known carcinogen.

Yvonne Gananbarr, a Galiwinku resident, has been sleeping on the floor of a school hall since the cyclone. She is unable to return to her house, which has been completely covered in asbestos. Even prior to the

storm, Gananbarr had requested to the Northern Territory housing commission to address basic maintenance problems in the house, including broken taps and showers, and walls which leak during the rain, according to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

Grace Tongatua, another Galiwinku resident, complained about the delay in government financial support, compared to public relations announcements. "Most family and friends assume it's been made from all the press releases that have been put out there," she said, according to the ABC. "If we didn't have family members that were able to provide us with extra money and things like that, it would be a fairly large stress on us to not have any money."

In Queensland, more than 550 homes have been declared uninhabitable after the category five cyclone Marcia, the larger of the two storms, hit. As of Thursday, at least 33,000 people were reported to be without access to the power grids across the state, down from over 65,000 last week. The storm brought down over 1,800 power lines. Some of the worst-hit larger cities include Rockhampton, with a population of over 80,000 people, and Yeppoon, population 25,000.

Many smaller towns have been left devastated. One such town, Marmor, with a population of 200 people, is expected to be without power for another week, and running water, which relies on electricity to be pumped from bores, has been cut off.

Thousands of people have been left to fend for themselves, with little or no government support, and have instead been forced to turn to charities, or friends and family, just to survive. Colin Maxwell of the Salvation Army reported that the organisation has been feeding 900 people a day across the state since the cyclone. While the crisis continues, the major national

media outlets have largely moved on to other issues.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott conducted a ritual, stage-managed tour to Yeppoon on Thursday, in a show of government support. In reality, the response by both the federal Liberal government and the state Labor government of Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk has been contemptuous.

A paltry \$1,000 sum, funded by the federal government, has been made available only to people whose home has either been destroyed or badly damaged, or who have suffered serious injury, with an additional \$400 per child. The criteria have been substantially tightened since cyclone Oswald, which hit Queensland and New South Wales in 2013, when the fund was available to anyone adversely affected.

As of yesterday, only 1,433 claims had been accepted, totaling just \$1,866,000, according to the *Morning Bulletin*. A second program run by the state government, called Immediate Hardship Assistance, has provided \$360,000 in total to approximately 2,000 people, an average of just \$180 per claimant. In addition, the state government has given \$250,000 to each of four major charity organisations, essentially making clear that private charities, rather than government services, are responsible for providing assistance.

Many farmers and small rural businesses have suffered catastrophic damages. The total economic toll on the agricultural industry across the state has been estimated at \$50 million. Rather than covering these costs, the federal government is providing low-interest loans, meaning the burden of the damages will ultimately be borne by the farmers and small businesses themselves.

The mass power outages have only highlighted the refusal of both government and private electricity providers to bury power lines underground, which is more costly than using above-ground poles. Queensland's electricity distributor Ergon indicated last Monday that it may take out private insurance against storm damage to the power network, meaning the cost will be passed on to the population via higher electricity prices.

In the small towns of Biloela and Jambin, residents have blamed the private operators of the Callide Dam for the flooding of their towns. Rather than carrying out controlled releases of water in the days leading up to

the cyclone, the dam operator SunWater allowed water to build up, until the flood gates automatically opened in the middle of the cyclone.

A number of commentators have pointed to the impact of global climate warming in contributing to the disaster. Last Friday was likely the first time that twin cyclones of category three or higher have struck Australia.

In particular, climatologists have predicted that global warming is expanding the earth's tropical zone further from the equator, exposing new regions to powerful cyclones. A study by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in the US claimed that the areas of the strongest cyclone intensity were now stretching from the equator at a rate of 56 kilometres per decade. Commentators have noted that the occurrence of a category five storm reaching as far south as Yeppoon, in central Queensland, is historically extremely rare, and potentially unprecedented.

Cairns climatologist professor Steve Turton, from James Cook University, said storms such as Marcia "are going to become more common in the future along the eastern seaboard of Australia," according to a February 20 *Sydney Morning Herald* article. "The research is suggesting that, in a warmer world, we'll get more intense cyclones because there'll be more energy in the oceans and also the atmosphere."



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