

New Zealand's capital caught unprepared for earthquake and flooding

Chris Ross**23 November 2016**

On 15 November, the day after a powerful 7.8 magnitude earthquake shook the South Island of New Zealand, the capital city Wellington, on the lower North Island, was cut off by heavy rain and strong winds. Widespread flooding, land slips and aftershocks closed both main state highways, caused the suspension of rail and bus services and prompted the evacuation of some residents.

On the South Island, the town of Kaikoura remains devastated and isolated by the earthquake, with State Highway 1 severed in both directions. The government sent military convoys and navy vessels, including the guided missile destroyer USS Samson, to evacuate the township. Billed as a “humanitarian” mission, it is another example of how natural disasters are used to conduct joint military exercises.

In Wellington, the quake and severe weather highlighted the lack of preparedness for a major disaster. Late and inadequate tsunami warnings created confusion. GeoNet advised residents living in low-lying areas to seek high ground without waiting for official warnings. Following widespread criticism, Prime Minister John Key belatedly promised a national disaster warning system capable of sending alerts to every cell phone. He claimed it would cost “tens of millions” of dollars.

In a rush to get business back to “normal,” Wellington’s recently-elected Labour Party mayor Justin Lester declared the central business district (CBD) to be safe, just a day after workers were told to stay home so building inspections could be conducted. Workers and residents were met by cordoned-off areas outside buildings shut down over structural concerns, which were still being discovered days after the event. Lester refused to declare red zones near affected buildings, saying an evacuation of the CBD would be a

“logistical nightmare.”

Relatively new buildings, such as the CentrePort-owned Bank of NZ Centre and the government’s Statistics NZ Office, that are built on reclaimed land, were badly damaged. On November 17, a carpark complex in the centre of the city was closed, with 100 residents evacuated from nearby apartments. The building has now been declared at “risk of collapse” and is to be demolished. Other buildings, such as Archives NZ, NZ Post House and Wellington Girls’ College, were also evacuated. The Queensgate mall and Wainuiomata mall in working-class suburbs outside the city remain closed. Some buildings could be shut for months.

Wellington Company director Ian Cassels said most workers returned to work the day after the quake “because their employers want them there.”

Acting Civil Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee initially said he was “a little surprised” at the decision to reopen the city so quickly but later backed off the criticism, complaining only of landlords not sharing building safety information with city authorities.

Mayor Lester told the media it was not his task “to create chaos or fear or hysteria.” Wellington, however, sits astride a major geographical fault and is at high risk of ongoing damage from aftershocks. The council has a list of over 660 buildings that are classified as earthquake risks. They are not among those damaged last week.

GeoNet, which monitors earthquake activity, has forecast aftershocks and smaller earthquakes in the immediate future. Yesterday another quake with a preliminary magnitude of 6.1–6.3 hit the North Island, north of Wellington. It was centred off the coast, almost 140km from Palmerston North, to a depth of 37 metres.

If a major earthquake, of 7.8 or above magnitude,

strikes Wellington or the surrounding region, the capital could easily be thrown into chaos, resulting in death, destruction and severing the city from the rest of the country.

The day after the November 15 quake, Wellington was hit by a severe weather system with 140 kmph (87mph) gale force winds and heavy rain. Lester initially dismissed the weather warnings, telling the *Herald* that the wind was “nothing more than a gentle breeze.”

However, State Highways 1 and 2 out of the city were closed for more than a day by flooding and lands slips. State Highway 58 between Porirua and the Hutt Valley, Paekakariki Hill Road and others were also closed, severing the capital’s land access. Bus services were brought to a standstill. Thousands of motorists waited hours for State Highway 2 to reopen.

Train services were cancelled because of multiple slips, and could not be replaced by buses due to road closures. All train services were suspended after two quake aftershocks of 5.8 and 5.2 magnitude but were subsequently resumed, without thorough track inspections. The longest double-track rail tunnel in the country, near Wellington, had some surface flooding but services continued regardless.

Some residents were trapped in their homes by rising floodwaters. Many river banks in Porirua and the Hutt Valley flooded, threatening nearby houses and prompting evacuation calls. Schools, kindergartens and libraries were closed.

This is not the first time the capital city has been cut off. In May 2015, heavy rain caused floods and slips, resulting in the closure of both state highways and all passenger rail lines. Severe weather has repeatedly exposed the capital’s run-down, outdated infrastructure. Much of it is over 100 years old. Without rational planning and billions being spent on infrastructure, the region’s topography and geographic isolation makes a disaster inevitable.

Immediate responsibility for this state of affairs rests with the Wellington City Council and the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC). Both institutions have been dominated over many years by Labour Party and Greens representatives. Rather than attempting to meet the needs of working people, their overriding concern is to facilitate business operations. The GWRC has recently opened up the rail network to

a private operator.

Events such as those of last week expose the complacency and indifference of the entire political establishment to the needs of ordinary citizens. This was starkly revealed in its response to the earthquake that devastated the city of Christchurch in 2011, with the loss of 185 lives.

Five years on, entire suburbs have been abandoned and areas of the central city remain rubble-strewn. Mayor Lianne Dalziel, a former Labour government minister, has worked closely with the National government to protect big business and impose the cost of the rebuild on the working class. The city council has cut staff, increased rates and begun to sell off assets to help fund its “share” of the rebuild.

The Christchurch debacle—in which the government and rapacious insurance companies have wrecked thousands of lives—stands as an indictment of the profit system and all its political representatives.



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