

Widespread damage after Cyclone Debbie batters north-east Australia

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Initial reports indicate widespread damage and destruction after large areas of north-east Queensland were struck by tropical Cyclone Debbie yesterday. At least one serious injury has been reported, after a wall collapsed on an elderly man in the town of Proserpine. Authorities have warned of the likelihood of further injuries, and possible fatalities, as more information comes to light.

The cyclone hit Queensland's north-eastern coast at around 12 p.m. yesterday, and was designated as a category four storm with winds of up to 260 kilometres per hour. By early Wednesday morning, the storm had been downgraded to a tropical low, with heavy rain and strong winds moving inland and towards the state's south-east.

As many as 68,000 residents of the Mackay, Whitsunday and Bowen regions were left without power overnight and around 400 schools and daycare centres are shut.

Authorities are set to survey a number of areas today, but already severe damage to houses and infrastructure has been reported in the worst affected areas. All roads to Airlie Beach, Bowen and Proserpine are closed, leaving the local residents stranded. Authorities reported today that they were seeking to reach up to 300 people on the Daydream Island holiday resort in the Whitsundays who have almost run out of water.

Photographs published online have shown houses with their roofs torn off, felled trees and overturned boats. Flying debris reportedly damaged many properties. Farms and agricultural businesses have also reported the destruction of equipment and crops.

Those who bore the brunt of the cyclone have described it as leaving destruction akin to a "war zone," while others have spoken of terrifying ordeals during the storm.

Sue, a resident in Proserpine, spoke to ABC Tropical North radio last night. "The next-door neighbour's roof has been flying off for hours and it's smashed into our side windows—we've got three broken windows now so the rooms are totalled," she said. She added, "I have lived up here all my life and this is the first time I've had damage like this."

Gail Harvey, a resident of the Whitsunday region, told ABC the storm was, "Horrendous—in 30 years I've been through a lot of cyclones on Hamilton Island. One year we had five cyclones—one after the other—and in recent years we've had some big ones but this one is just staying around and not moving."

Questions have already been raised over the preparations by government authorities for the cyclone.

Residents of Hamilton Island, a popular resort, have stated that despite being in the path of the storm, there was no attempt made to evacuate them or provide any assistance in the lead-up to the cyclone.

Lissa Morris, a resident on the island, told *news.com.au* yesterday that, "We would have evacuated but we didn't get a chance. We've had literally no advice, everyone is literally stranded, no one can get on or off the island."

In other areas, infrastructure for severe weather events has not kept pace with population growth. The area around Bowen, a town on the north-eastern coast, which was among the worst hit by the storm, has a population of 10,000, but its evacuation centre can only accommodate 800 people. The evacuation centre at nearby Proserpine, which has a population of over 3,000, has a similar capacity.

In the lead-up to the storm, Whitsunday Regional Council Mayor Andrew Wilcox told residents who could not leave Bowen to stay with friends and family in "high, dry places." He said that the cyclone shelter

was a “last resort.”

Many of the region’s houses do not have cyclone-proof features. Prior to the storm, State Emergency Service regional manager Daryl Camp said he had concerns for 5,500 homes in Burdekin, an area near Bowen, which had been built prior to 1980. “If it’s still nails that hold the roof down, if the roof trusses aren’t fixed to a cyclone standard, that’s where you get a bit of issue,” Camp said.

Collinsville, a mining town south-west of Bowen was also unprepared for the storm, which struck as a category two cyclone on Tuesday night. There were no evacuation centres set up in the town, which has never experienced a storm of that magnitude, and there are reports of widespread damage to houses. As in previous disasters, the poor and working class will be worst affected.

Weather experts have noted that the scope of Cyclone Debbie’s damage may be typical of new cyclonic patterns. While the number of tropical cyclones hitting Queensland and Western Australia are thought to be at the lowest levels in up to 500 years, the storm events that do occur are increasingly severe. There are ongoing discussions among scientists as to whether the new patterns are attributable to human-induced climate change.

In an article on the *Conversation*, Jonathan Nott, a Professor of Physical Geography at James Cook University warned that current infrastructure and planning, based on a lull in cyclonic activity over the past four decades, may be inadequate for severe storms. Nott wrote that if projections of more severe cyclones are correct, “we are taking a big gamble with existing homes, roads and offices.”

Nott also raised questions over the commitment of the Queensland state Labor government, and local authorities, to further coastal developments, including lucrative commercial projects. In order to facilitate these projects, the government recently removed a safeguard on state planning policy to consider future sea level rises.

The subordination of public safety to immediate profit interests, and a lack of planning have exacerbated previous disasters. In 2011, Cyclone Yasi struck north-east Queensland, killing one person, demolishing 150 homes and rendering another 650 uninhabitable.

The cyclone revealed a chronic lack of preparation by

state and federal government authorities, with many of the government’s evacuation centres not rated as cyclone proof. This was despite a pledge by the state Labor government, following the devastation wrought by Cyclone Larry in 2006, that well-equipped and tested evacuation centres would be built in all communities across north-east Queensland.

The Queensland government has stated that houses in some areas struck by Cyclone Debbie may be without power for a week. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, along with federal Labor leader Bill Shorten, issued cynical calls for the major insurance companies to compensate those hit by the storm, in a bid to defuse suspicions that as in previous disasters, they will do everything they can to avoid payments.

Significantly, the federal government’s response to the cyclone has centred on the deployment of 1,000 military personnel to affected areas, along with a naval vessel, HMAS Choules, an airforce craft and army and navy helicopters. Brigadier Christopher Field was appointed State Recovery Commander by Turnbull, who declared that he was a “distinguished military officer.”

Field was heavily involved in the army-led response to the 2011 Queensland floods. The military official who was in charge of that response menacingly warned against media reportage of community “divisiveness,” i.e., anger at authorities, claiming that it would hamper the “success” of the operation. As in 2011, the current mobilisation is aimed at intimidating critics of the government response, and normalising the ever-greater role of the military in civilian life.



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