Australia: 2,000 homes submerged in Townsville as floodgates open

Martin Scott
5 February 2019

About 2,000 homes in the Australian city of Townsville were under water on Sunday, and thousands of residents have fled their homes due to catastrophic flooding.

Heavy rainfall caused the Ross River Dam to exceed its capacity by 150 percent before the dam was fully opened, unleashing a torrent of water into the Ross River, which runs through the centre of Townsville.

Rescue teams were forced to launch boats into the streets of the city in northern Queensland as rising floodwaters covered roads, cutting off access to sections of the city with a population of 170,000.

Police warned residents to remain in their homes rather than attempt to drive through flooded streets. However, there were reports on social media of people waiting many hours for assistance from the volunteer State Emergency Service, which was overwhelmed by more than 850 calls for help in a 24-hour period.

In the absence of adequately resourced emergency services, soldiers from the nearby Lavarack Barracks were sent in to aid the evacuation. The deployment of the military is now increasingly common in civil emergencies and is a part of the militarisation of every aspect of life.

More than 14,000 properties are still without power, and numerous burst pipes caused by the flood threaten to leave residents without running water.

More than 1,000 people were forced to seek emergency accommodation in the city's overcrowded and ill-equipped evacuation centres. Workers and their families sheltering in these facilities have had to rely on donations of food, clothing, and bedding from generous members of the public.

Townsville received 1012mm (40 inches) of rain in the last week, significantly more than the previous 7-day record of 886mm set in the infamous "Night of Noah" floods of 1998.

Government authorities and the media have characterised the flood as an isolated and unexpected natural disaster, but chaotic urban planning, lack of disaster management resources, and questionable management of water storage all contributed to the devastation.

This is first time since the dam was upgraded in 2007 that the water level has exceeded 43m—the point at which the gates are fully opened. But it is the eighth time in less than 12 years that the level has exceeded 38.65m—the point at which the gates begin to open. It would seem, despite assurances to the contrary, that the dam is inadequate to protect Townsville's residents from floods.

Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk described the flood as a "one-in-100-year" event, prompting residents to wonder why they have experienced two such events in the past 21 years.

The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation's "State of the Climate 2018" report projects that human-induced climate change will lead to "an increase in intense heavy rainfall throughout Australia," meaning that "one-in-100-year" floods are likely to become more frequent and more severe.

Under capitalism and its division of the world into rival nation states, no serious action to end climate change is possible. Successive international climate summits have demonstrated that governments are fundamentally incapable of implementing a global plan to reduce carbon emissions, for fear that it would hurt the profits of "their" corporations.

Townsville mayor Jenny Hill struck out at "armchair critics" on social media, saying: "The dam has done its job." Such reassurances provide little comfort for those whose homes have been destroyed or severely

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damaged.

Some, like Hermit Park resident Andrew Roberts, are asking why the water in the dam was allowed to reach such a high level. “It should never have been this bad. Why didn’t they have releases earlier and give the water a chance to get away?” he exclaimed. “Heads should roll over this.”

The situation is reminiscent of the January 2011 flood in which the south east Queensland cities of Brisbane and Ipswich were flooded after the Wivenhoe Dam was opened. A royal commission into the flood found that South East Queensland Water Corporation (SEQW) flood engineers had breached protocol in failing to reduce the level of the dam in preparation for forecast rainfall.

One of the submerged areas in Townsville is a still incomplete housing development, “The Village,” built on former cattle grazing land on the south bank of the Ross River. A flood investigation undertaken prior to the construction, claimed “100-year flood immunity” for the site based on a maximum dam discharge rate of less than 800 cubic metres. When the floodgates were fully opened last week, water was released into the river at a rate of 1900 cubic metres per second.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has been quick to announce a one-off “Disaster Relief Payment,” but the paltry sum of $1,000 will do little to help residents whose homes were damaged or destroyed by the flood.

In line with previous Australian government responses to such disasters, the vast majority of any “relief” funding will go towards rebuilding infrastructure to serve the interests of big corporations.

In response to devastating floods in 2010-11, the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced a $5.6 billion package, of which only $720 million went to victims of the flood.

The package was financed by cuts to education, housing and environmental programs; and a tax levy primarily shouldered by workers earning less than $80,000 a year. The bulk of the funding was used to rebuild roads, railways, and ports to allow mining corporations to maintain their massive profits.

Gillard was insistent that none of the funds would be used to repair the homes of uninsured victims, ensuring that multi-billion-dollar insurance companies would not see a dent in their profits.

The Queensland government has set up an appeal through charity donation website, GIVIT, to encourage ordinary people to purchase and send gift vouchers from major supermarket and department store chains, ensuring that these corporations will profit from the misery of Townsville’s flood victims.

There is no suggestion that the supermarket chains themselves, the developers who have built housing estates on floodplains, the banks that have financed these developments, or the mining companies and refineries that make billions of dollars in the region, should contribute to the relief effort or the subsequent rebuilding.

Instead, ordinary workers will again bear the burden of cleaning up the mess caused by ill-conceived, profit-driven urban development, poorly-resourced emergency services, and inadequate flood mitigation plans.

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