

Australia: Northern Queensland flood causes widespread destruction

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As rains subside, parts of northern Queensland remain flooded. The region, which has experienced severe droughts over the past decade and bushfires late last year, is now contending with the effects of widespread flooding this month.

So far, the deluge has claimed at least two lives. There are grave fears for another man who went missing after his boat crashed in flood waters near Ayr last Friday.

Last Tuesday, the bodies of Troy Mathieson and Hughie Morton were discovered in a stormwater drain near Aitkenvale Park in Townsville. The men, aged 23 and 21, were reported missing on Monday. Police claimed they were wanted in connection with a break-in at a Dan Murphy's bottle shop. They were alleged to have run into flood waters after fleeing the scene.

The tragic fatalities are being investigated by the Office of the State Coroner as deaths in custody. Queensland Police Ethical Standards Command has also launched an internal inquiry. Like every other investigation of deaths in custody over the past three decades, the inquiries will undoubtedly attempt to whitewash the role of the police.

While the full extent of the damage to the city of Townsville and northern Queensland remains unknown, initial reports point to a major catastrophe.

An estimated 82,000 homes in Townsville have been affected by the flood. Some 1,500 homes have been assessed, with 738 found to be severely damaged and 252 uninhabitable. According to the Insurance Council, 11,800 claims totalling \$147 million in losses have already been lodged. Some 16,000 people have already applied for personal hardship payments.

Relief payments from the federal government are capped at a minuscule \$1,000 per person, well below what is needed to address the widespread damage

caused by the flood.

Many residents who do not have home and contents insurance have lost everything they own. More than half of those living in the state do not have such insurance.

Cattle graziers have been particularly hit hard by the flooding. Up to 300,000 cattle may have been killed as a result of the flooding and its aftermath, with financial losses expected to approach \$300 million. Some graziers have lost all of their livestock.

The devastation is not merely the result of a natural disaster. It is also a product of inadequate urban planning, a lack of disaster management resources, and questionable management of water storage.

The impact of the flooding has again revealed the failure of successive Labor and Liberal-National Party Queensland governments to plan for natural disasters.

Anger among Townsville residents has continued to grow about a decision to delay the opening of the Ross River Dam flood gates until the night of February 3.

The decision not to open the gates sooner was based on a 2012 study which indicated that only 90 properties would be affected during a "one-in-100-year" flood event. The study, however, also stated that if flood levels were greater than anticipated, then waiting to open the dam gates would result in a far greater number of flooded properties.

Townsville Mayor Jenny Hill stated last week: "It is clear the flood levels in the Ross River were greater than a one in 500 years event." She added that the "rainfall totals over the Ross River dam catchment were in excess of a one in 2,000 years rainfall event." Such catastrophic events, however, are taking place with increasing frequency.

There are parallels with the 2011 floods, during 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.

In an effort at damage control, the Queensland Labor government has announced an inquiry into “key preparedness and response elements.”

Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk has attempted to place blame for the disaster on the Townsville City Council. Labor governments, however, like their Liberal-National Party counterparts, have gutted funding for disaster and emergency services and have opposed any measures that could impact on the profits of the major corporations.

For their part, the Townsville authorities, including Hill, have attempted to divert mounting anger into hostility against alleged looters. Hill last week denounced alleged looters as “scumbags.” She promoted vigilantism, warning those who had committed crimes to “turn themselves in... before the community come looking for you.”

Hill’s comments were part of a broader law and order campaign surrounding the floods. Many of the flood relief operations have been conducted by the military.

Last Wednesday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison toured Townsville in a military camouflage jacket. He travelled in an amphibious military vehicle. The visit provided an opportunity for Morrison to feign sympathy for the victims of the flood while avoiding all serious questions about the causes of the devastation.

When questioned about whether he believed the recent spate of extreme weather events were related to climate change, Morrison responded, “I’m not engaging in broader policy debates today.”

Multiple climate change studies, however, including the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation’s “State of the Climate 2018” have warned that man-made climate change is leading to “an increase in intense heavy rainfall throughout Australia”.

Morrison’s government has close ties to the major coal companies and other sections of industry responsible for substantial carbon emissions. Previous federal Labor governments have also done nothing to address the growing threat of climate change. Under the

former Gillard Labor government’s carbon tax, for instance, carbon emissions were actually forecast to increase.

The failure of all governments to mitigate and prepare for flooding and other disasters is an indictment of the capitalist system, under which all areas of social life, including the safety of ordinary people, are subordinated to the profit dictates of the banks and big business. As in previous disasters, the burden of the recent flooding will fall on workers and the poor.



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