Two deaths in Australia's floods as poor government planning exposed

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Floods that have swept across Australia's east coast since the weekend have claimed their first victims, with the tragic death yesterday of a 25-year-old worker in Sydney and the discovery of the body of a 38-year-old man on Queensland's Gold Coast.

Large swathes of New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, and south-eastern Queensland were struck by record rainfalls that began last week and persisted until late Tuesday. Deluges then occurred in Victoria and Tasmania on Wednesday as the storm system shifted south.

Some 40,000 people have been forced to flee their homes since Sunday. While some have been able to return as waters have subsided, thousands remain in hotels and evacuation centres. With relief operations in early stages, an untold number of properties have been damaged or rendered uninhabitable.

Flood waters from the Hawkesbury and Nepean rivers, northwest of Sydney, are not expected to recede until the weekend, meaning areas of the city remain affected. Parts of the NSW mid-north coast remain submerged. Other regional and rural areas continue to be affected by swollen rivers.

It has become clear that the scale of the flooding is not merely a natural phenomenon, but the outcome of government policy, including the encouragement of housing construction on flood plains and a lack of disaster planning.

Troubling questions have emerged about yesterday's fatality in Sydney. The victim, Ayaz Younus, was a young migrant worker from Pakistan who was travelling to his first day of work for a contract construction company.

Younus was driving along Cattai Ridge Road in the north-western suburb of Glenorie when his car entered floodwaters. Unable to open the door or the windows, potentially because of a failure of the car's electric system, he called emergency services. Younus was on the phone to them for up to 45 minutes, as the car sank into 10 metres of water, without police or rescuers arriving. When his body was later found, police said the car's interior showed signs of "someone fighting for their life to get out."

Information remains scanty, including about why it took emergency services so long to arrive. Police, however, revealed that a floodgate meant to indicate the closure of the road was completely underwater.

In comments to Nine News last night, an anonymous local resident said an almost identical incident had taken place on Monday morning. One of his neighbours "was up moving stuff to higher ground in his bobcat" and saw that a ute was trapped in water on the same corner of the road where Younus later perished. The driver of the ute, who had been stuck in the vehicle for around an hour, was rescued by residents using the bobcat.

The apparent absence of basic safety measures on a road in Sydney, Australia's largest city, points to the shambolic character of the response to natural disasters.

David Hornman, the man who died on the Gold Coast, was also killed after his vehicle was subsumed by floodwaters. Dozens of other cases of motorists being trapped in their cars have been reported in the media.

Residents of Penrith, a major Sydney suburb, were given just half an hour's notice to evacuate on Sunday, and were told that if they failed to leave they would risk being stranded in floodwaters without electricity or running water. Similar hasty evacuations occurred on the mid-north coast, leaving some residents no time to move their belongings to higher ground. This was days after the authorities were aware that large-scale flooding was likely.

Despite a spate of natural disasters, and promises from state and federal governments, Australia still has no national agency responsible for coordinating the response

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to such events. The issue came to centre stage after the 2019–20 bushfires, when official inaction amid some of the worst blazes in decades contributed to 30 deaths and the destruction of more than 2,500 homes.

A royal commission, which white-washed the government negligence, recommended the creation of a national disaster relief agency. More than a year on from the fires, however, the federal Liberal-National government's "National Resilience, Relief and Recovery Agency" exists only in an online statement announcing it would be established sometime in 2021.

As a result, State Emergency Services, overwhelmingly staffed by volunteers, are the primary frontline responders to disasters. As in the bushfire catastrophe, the Australian Defence Force is being mobilised, underscoring the lack of civilian emergency resources and ongoing attempts to normalise the domestic deployment of the military.

The impact of the flooding on the outskirts of Sydney has highlighted the encouragement by successive NSW state governments, Labor and Liberal alike, of housing construction on floodplains.

There are already some 70,000 residents on the flood plain of the Hawkesbury and Nepean rivers. Despite the catastrophe that is still underway, the NSW Liberal government has signalled it will continue with plans for the population there to be increased to 130,000 by 2050.

Government ministers have floated a 17-metre heightening of the walls of Warragamba Dam, Sydney's main water supply, which overflowed onto the plain this week. Experts said this would not lessen the dangers but only seek to legitimise the building plans.

The government proposal was a "really silly idea," Professor James Pittock, a waterways expert at the Australian National University (ANU) told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "I would argue that the best approach is to prevent development on the flood plains … use that land for agriculture, and recreation and nature conservation. But don't put more houses there."

The NSW government's Floodplain Development Manual, distributed to local councils, which are responsible for building approvals, encourages construction on floodplains. "The policy recognises the benefits of use, occupation and development of flood-prone land," it states. "Flood-prone land is a valuable resource that should not be sterilised by unnecessarily precluding its development."

This is simply the line of the property developers and construction companies. Its sole purpose is to continue the bonanza for them resulting from government tax incentives, cheap credit and virtually no regulation. This has contributed to soaring housing prices, which have driven many workers and the poor to the furthest reaches of the city, including the floodplains. Annual household insurance premiums in such areas are as high as $30,000, so thousands of flood victims are not insured, and face a financial crisis.

The dangers resulting from this subordination of public safety to profit interests are intensified by the growing frequency of catastrophic weather events. For some of those affected, such as on the mid-north coast, the floods are the fourth natural disaster they have experienced in a year, following two bushfire seasons and a drought.

Experts have warned that such extreme weather events will become more common as a result of climate change. The dangers were spelled out in an article published on the *Conversation* by Joelle Gergis, an ANU professor who is preparing a report for the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Gergins explained: "The recent flooding in New South Wales is consistent with what we might expect as climate change continues. Australia's natural rainfall patterns are highly variable. This means the influence climate change has on any single weather event is difficult to determine; the signal is buried in the background of a lot of climatic 'noise.' But as our planet warms, the water-holding capacity of the lower atmosphere increases by around 7 percent for every 1 degree of warming. This can cause heavier rainfall, which in turn increases flood risk."

Every Australian government over the past two decades has rejected calls for a substantial cut to carbon emissions and other measures to tackle global warming, in line with their defence of the capitalist interests responsible for the environmental crisis.

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