

Floods cause deaths and widespread destruction in Australia

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In Australia, calamities have unfolded across the states of Queensland and New South Wales (NSW) over the past few days as dozens of cities, towns and villages have been impacted by widespread rain and flooding, which has reached historic levels in some cases.

So far, at least eight people have lost their lives, including a Queensland State Emergency Services (SES) volunteer who attempted to rescue a family in distress. Three more people are still reported to be missing in the Queensland capital of Brisbane, and at least 1,000 remain unaccounted for in the northern NSW city of Lismore.

Huge volumes of rain fell across the region. In Brisbane, the country's third largest city, total rainfall over three days was 611 millimetres (24 inches), surpassing all records since monitoring of the area began in 1840.

Residents of over 140 Brisbane suburbs have been threatened by rising water levels in creeks and the Brisbane River—which was at 3.5 metres last night. The levels in the river have not passed the 4.4-metre record set during the last devastating floods in 2011, but the flooding is more widespread.

Some areas that were not affected by the 2011 floods, including the Brisbane suburbs of Wilston and Windsor, were inundated. An estimated 20,000 homes across the state have been damaged, including 15,000 in the Brisbane area, mainly in low-lying working-class suburbs, including Goodna and Beenleigh.

The extreme weather system that dumped the rain moved slowly south over several days, from north of Brisbane to the neighbouring state of NSW, where it flooded the regional city of Lismore and then headed down the NSW coast toward Sydney.

Hundreds of people have been displaced. In

Queensland, over 1,000 people have been evacuated, while more than 1,500 people are in evacuation shelters across the state, and at least 53,000 homes were without power as of last night. In NSW, approximately 60,000 people in the state's north have been affected by evacuation orders. More than 300,000 have been warned they may need to flee their homes.

First to be inundated was Gympie, 170 kilometres north of Brisbane. The highest flood levels in 100 years stranded hundreds of people, with more than 3,600 properties affected and a thousand submerged. On Sunday morning, the water level of the Mary River peaked at 22.8 metres, the highest ever recorded since 1893. Hundreds of residents remain in evacuation centres, waiting for the water to recede.

Further downstream, the city of Maryborough, 250 kilometres north of Brisbane, was at the centre of another emergency late on Monday as the Mary River climbed to a forecast peak of 10.7 metres, barely 50 centimetres short of the height of its flood levee.

In Brisbane, many residents who were flooded in 2011 were hit again. Despite the 2011 disaster, in which 35 people died and thousands of homes were destroyed, the authorities failed to issue timely warnings of the impending disaster.

On Sunday afternoon, people were rescued from their homes and others fled as water lapped at their doorsteps. Residents complained to the media about the lack of warning, saying they could have sandbagged or saved their belongings if they had been given time to organise. Many flood victims said they were uninsured because of the exorbitant premiums for flood cover.

Despite the 2011 catastrophe, homes are still being built, and bought or sold, in flood-prone areas of Brisbane. Lord Mayor Adrian Schrinner laid the responsibility on homebuyers, saying they were aware

of the risks.

In scenes reminiscent of 2011, drifting boats and large chunks of debris caused havoc and damage in the Brisbane River and major city roads were cut. Some 60,000 homes were without power. Schools and the rail system were closed yesterday.

Wivenhoe Dam, west of Brisbane, went from some 40 percent of capacity to over 180 percent in three days, forcing the authorities to begin releasing water, adding to the flows into the Brisbane River. As in 2011, it appeared that water releases began too late to avoid worsening the disaster.

Apparently unanticipated by government authorities, flooding has now happened in Brisbane River tributary catchments. The suburban Enoggera Reservoir, which does not have a gate and releases water when it is over capacity, was at 270 percent capacity on Sunday night.

Yesterday, flooding spread to northern NSW. The regional city of Lismore experienced the worst-ever floods in its history, engulfing the homes of thousands of people in the middle of the night without any prior official warning.

In each location, there has been a clear contrast between the efforts of local people and SES volunteers, who rescued many, and the response of the state and federal governments.

In Brisbane there was anger among flood victims that the state Labor Party government had earlier said that the situation would be safe, and was not on the scale of 2011.

At a press conference, Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk reacted defensively when asked why successive state governments had failed after a decade to make adequate preparations for a disaster of this magnitude.

Many of the 177 recommendations made to the previous state Labor government under Premier Anna Bligh by an official inquiry after the 2011 floods, including an early flood warning system, and changes to training and procedures at the Wivenhoe dam, have not been implemented.

Palaszczuk claimed that her government was powerless in the face of the extreme weather, despite advance warnings from the Bureau of Meteorology of major flooding events. She insisted that “we didn’t know that this was going to happen. This is Mother Nature.”

The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report found that catastrophic flooding is becoming more likely internationally due to global warming. Recent scientific studies into intensive rain systems, dubbed “atmospheric rivers,” have shown that they make devastating floods more likely in a warmer world under climate change.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison flew to Brisbane to make a show of concern for the victims of the floods. As in the 2019–20 bushfire crisis, his main focus was on deploying military personnel to assist the emergency and recovery operation. That exposes the lack of adequate civilian disaster resources.

Federal Defence Minister Peter Dutton provoked outrage on social media for setting up a GoFundMe fundraiser and appealing for donations to pay for the recovery of the Pine Rivers Community in his Queensland electorate. His appeal served to underscore the inadequacy of the government’s financial response.

The federal Liberal-National government’s \$4 billion Emergency Response Fund has reportedly not spent a cent on disaster recovery since the fund’s creation in 2019, while accruing \$800 million in interest.

In Queensland, state government grants of just \$180 for individuals and \$900 for families of more than five people have been made available in some flood-affected areas, while the federal government has offered only one-time payments of \$1,000 for each eligible adult and \$400 per child.



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