

Australia: Residents abandoned by government in flood crisis

Martin Scott, Michael Newman
4 March 2022

As residents of Lismore and surrounding parts of northern New South Wales (NSW) begin to clean up and recover belongings from their flood- and storm-damaged homes, anger and frustration is mounting over the pitiful official response to the disaster.

While weather on Australia's east coast today has not been as extreme as predicted, heavy rainfall is expected to continue over the weekend and into next week, including in areas already devastated by floods. With rivers and dams overflowing, the continued downpour means the danger is far from over.

More than four days after large parts of Lismore, including the entire CBD, were inundated by floodwaters, thousands of residents are still without power, phone and internet service, while food, drinking water and fuel are in desperately short supply. Evacuation centres are overcrowded, raising the possibility of a COVID-19 outbreak amid increasing infections across the state.

From the outset, almost every aspect of the emergency response has been left up to the working class local population. In Lismore, dozens of ordinary people turned up with their own boats, and many more joined the rescue operation, bravely going from house to house to evacuate trapped residents.

The sense of complete abandonment by the state and federal governments has built up throughout the ongoing crisis, as official aid has failed to materialise.

Brigitte Boll wrote on Facebook: "Milk, water, groceries, basics, everything is needed right now. Where is the help from federal gov? No one to be seen."

Lyn Moore wrote: "Where is the State & Federal government help with getting food etc to these areas. I know the highways are flooded but can't they bring in Army vehicles?"

The first deployment of 70 Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel to aid the rescue and recovery effort occurred only on Wednesday, and a further 170 were not

sent until today.

The fact that the military was sent at all, as they now are in response to almost every disaster, is a result of decades of cuts to civilian emergency services, leaving the ADF, with its ever-increasing budget, as the only manpower available. This is also aimed at normalising the presence of soldiers on domestic soil, under conditions of widespread hostility to inequality and a social crisis that will be exacerbated by the floods.

Holly Lovegrove wrote on Facebook yesterday: "There were some ADF men working on Terania St today but they said they're only doing other ADF people's houses which is really disappointing."

Lovegrove pointed out the stark contrast between the pitiful official response and the heroic and self-sacrificing actions of ordinary people. She wrote: "The Fijian/Samoan men seem to be doing more heavy lifting than our paid government services. Are there any services that aren't run by volunteers?"

Lovegrove was referring to a group of abattoir workers who have played a major role in the rescue and recovery effort, including saving 60 residents from an aged care facility on Monday. They have only recently arrived from Fiji under the Pacific Labour Scheme, which provides cheap labour from impoverished countries to business, while denying workers basic citizenship rights.

Sally Purcell wrote on Twitter: "So much has been left to private citizens when it was so clear that Lismore, this very flood prone town, was in grave danger. The federal and NSW governments have, once again, demonstrated their incompetence and have shown how little they care about people."

Lismore flood victims are struggling to register for the federal government's pitiful one-off \$1,000 per adult and \$400 per child disaster payment. Severely limited phone and internet access is preventing many flood victims from accessing online services, and, according to social media

reports, yesterday a single Services Australia worker was sent to manually handle thousands of claims.

On Wednesday, in nearby Coraki, hundreds of people were marooned at an evacuation centre as the town ran short of food and bottled water. Some resorted to siphoning petrol from their cars to use in private boats to rescue survivors trapped on the roofs of their houses. A State Emergency Service (SES) boat with supplies did not arrive in the town until late afternoon.

The central business district of Casino was flooded for the first time in the city's history, with 330 homes reported as inundated.

In Brisbane, the state capital of Queensland, the situation is little better. Primary responsibility for the clean-up has been dumped on a "mud army" of more than 10,000 volunteers who responded to a call from the city council.

There too, residents have expressed anger at the woeful response and preparation by the state Labor government.

Brisbane Corso resident Nigel Bean told the *Courier-Mail* he was only notified of advancing floods late Saturday night. "Somebody has to be put on the spot and asked, 'please explain, what has gone wrong?'" Bean said. "How on Earth can we be in a mega-metropolitan city that just won the 2032 Olympics and yet can't even prevent, predict or communicate flooding in the CBD?"

SEQWater was forced to defend its decision not to begin releasing water from Wivenhoe Dam last Tuesday when the Bureau of Meteorology initially forecast heavy rain. Flood mitigation releases did not begin for another three days. The state-owned water authority was found guilty of negligence by a court in 2019 for contributing to the flooding of at least 20,000 Brisbane homes in 2011.

According to a new report by Deloitte Access Economics, only 3 percent of public money allocated to disaster relief is invested in preparation and mitigation. As victims of previous floods, bushfires and other disasters attest, very little of this money ends up in the hands of those who lose their homes.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared Tuesday that the federal government had paid out \$17 billion in disaster relief in the past three years. This included \$13 billion for the COVID-19 disaster payment and pandemic leave.

Two thirds of the \$1.5 billion spent following the 2019 floods in Queensland was to establish a new AgRebuild loan scheme. In fact, between July 2019 and June 2021, just 64 loans were approved nationwide for flood-affected farms and agribusinesses, totalling \$185 million.

A federal Emergency Response Fund established in

2019 and financed through a \$4 billion cut in research funding has "committed" just \$150 million to disaster mitigation, while earning more than \$800 million in interest.

Emergency Response Minister Bridget McKenzie yesterday dismissed any idea of federal responsibility for the disaster, proclaiming "we don't own the bulldozers," and that they were relying on states and territories for flood mitigations, including levees, because "they were too expensive."

National Recovery and Resilience Agency head Shane Stone hit back at critics of the official response, blaming flood victims for their plight. Stone told Nine newspapers: "You've got people who want to live among the gum trees, what do you think is going to happen? Their house falls in the river, and they say it's the government's fault."

The reality is, over decades, successive governments have opened up large tracts of land on flood plains for residential development, in line with the demands of property developers. With housing prices rapidly increasing while wages have stagnated or fallen, more and more working-class families have been forced out to these low-lying areas.

The failure of state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, to respond to this crisis, before, during or afterward, is not an aberration, but a direct product of the capitalist system, in which the health and lives of working people are entirely subordinated to the profit interests of big business.



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