

“Morrison came here on Thursday and wouldn’t talk to us”

Residents in flooded Australian regional city condemn lack of government help

Our reporters
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Two weeks after life-threatening floodwaters swamped thousands of homes in the early hours of February 28 with little or no official warning, residents of the northern New South Wales regional city of Lismore say governments have left them living in something like a “war zone.”

Streets throughout the city’s lower-level neighbourhoods, on both sides of the Wilson River, are lined with tons of rotting debris, itself a health hazard, with little prospect of removal for weeks. In that debris, many people have lost everything, even family photos and personal documents.

In a population of 44,000, some 14,000 homes were engulfed. An estimated two-thirds need to be demolished or undergo substantial repairs. At least four people were killed.

A WSWs reporting team spoke to people trying to clean out their ruined homes, while still facing months of living in temporary accommodation. Some were staying with friends or relatives. Others were camped in the city’s crowded evacuation centre—where there has been a COVID-19 outbreak—or even sleeping in cars or tents.

There was simmering anger at the delayed and inadequate response of the federal and state governments, on top of the failure of the same governments to protect them from the disaster in the first place. Everyone knew someone who had died as a result.

Three days before the deadly flooding began, despite warnings of a looming rain deluge, the state government’s Special Emergency Services (SES), which had only two boats in the city, refused to call in urgent resources, including rescue helicopters and army units.

If not for the often-heroic rescue efforts and ongoing help and support of volunteers from throughout the region and across the country, trying to fill the void left by governments, hundreds of people would probably have

died and the plight of the survivors would be much worse.

Everywhere our team went, there was a visible contrast between the indifferent and slow response of governments, and the speed and generosity of neighbours, local people and volunteers, who drove from as far as Melbourne, 1,600 kilometres away.

Even as we interviewed people, cars drove down streets offering food or assistance. One man, a member of a hundreds-strong support group that sprang up on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast, arrived to offer a high-pressure gurney to hose out a muddy house.

Fraught residents told harrowing stories of being engulfed by surging water in the middle of the night, and being rescued by volunteers in boats and kayaks, with the SES nowhere to be seen.

Tammy, a mother and grandmother, was shovelling out mud in front of her rented home in South Lismore, helped by her sister, who was operating a gurney, and a neighbour, who had supplied a generator to power the gurney.

Tammy’s house is raised well above ground level, yet the flood reached window-height, leaving her trapped in waist-deep water for more than six hours before volunteers freed her.

“We got rescued out of my front bedroom window when we could not kick down the door. It was totally stuck. We did have an evacuation truck come past about midnight but because the previous floods have been nothing like this, we just thought we would be cut off from town for a few days, and we had everything we needed, so we would be OK.

“We had no thought that the water would come so high. It was six in the morning when my neighbour rang me and said the water was about to come in my house. I looked out and saw that the water had already lapped up 15 steps.

“We got rescued at 1.30 in the afternoon by boat by community members. Boats were coming before that, but I told them to rescue a family and elderly people in the street first. We were ducking power lines as we were being boated out, that’s how high the water was!”

Tammy said people were stuck in like sardines in a nearby school before being boated out and then bussed to a makeshift evacuation centre at the Goonellabah Sports and Aquatic Centre (GSAC). Later, GSAC was closed and she was moved to the sole remaining evacuation centre at the Southern Cross University campus.

Residents were told that council or SES workers could not come onto their properties, so they had to clear out everything onto the street themselves. But the community help had been “awesome.”

“Some guys I don’t know came along with a wheelbarrow yesterday. Someone came with a backhoe today. We have had beautiful people coming from so far away to help or give us sandwiches or blankets and pillows. We also had a food truck come up from Melbourne.”

The evacuation centre at the university was “horrible” because there were “way too many people” and it was not being cleaned often enough. At least 100 people were camped in a basketball court, and probably 400 in other sections or outside, including previously homeless people.

“We had a massive homeless problem here, even before the flood,” Tammy commented. “They will have nowhere to go after this. That worries me. So many houses now have tape around them.”

Tammy explained that the city levee, which was swamped by floodwaters for the second time in five years, did not protect the people in South Lismore at all. In fact, by being erected around the central business district, the levee made floods worse for her neighbourhood.

“We are living in a floodplain, so we should know we will have floods but today, because it costs so much to get a house, this is where people are going to be able to afford. It takes you a couple of generations to afford a house now. I’m never going to be able to afford that for my kids.

“It’s a hard pill to swallow to know that I have nowhere to go, and I can’t do anything about it. My landlord came and had a look and said it would be 12 months before he could rent the house again... My children and grandchildren were not living here anymore, but they had left lots of their personal things here.”

Tammy said politicians were fighting between themselves, blaming each other, while people needed

help. She had gone to a protest, joined by about 300 people, when Prime Minister Scott Morrison arrived for a brief visit last Thursday, protected by more than 100 police.

“Morrison came here on Thursday and wouldn’t talk to us. He wouldn’t even show his face. He took the press conference from inside the council chamber, while we had ladies outside screaming, ‘We need help.’ I got videos of it.

“The police lined us all up and made a fence so we couldn’t get any closer while he got out of the car and ran inside... We heard later that he had banned the media because he doesn’t want the world to see it like it really is... Everybody around the world sees this, but they don’t really know what is going on.

“We were chanting, ‘It’s raining, it’s pouring, the PM is snoring,’ ‘Hey hey, hey ho, Scott Morrison’s got to go’ and ‘We need housing, we need hoses.’

“He can’t come here offering thoughts and prayers and handshakes! What we were saying is that we want him to open his wallet, and even that is not enough. The money is nothing if we don’t have the help. What is it now? Two weeks after the flood!”

Tammy was scathing of the decision by Premier Dominic Perrottet’s Liberal-National state government to send 120 mobile homes to Casino, a town 30 kilometres west of Lismore, to house flood victims. “That won’t be enough! No way. There are so many people couch-surfing or living in other temporary accommodation. And people will be sent to Casino, where they have no connections.”

Tammy said community groups were organising but their requests would only fall on deaf ears. Asked for her political reflection on the disaster, she said: “I just think that the government is sending money overseas, but look here, a bomb’s gone off here too... I know Morrison’s putting a lot more money into the military but it should be his responsibility to get into this fight here.”



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