

Australia: Brisbane flood victims face long cleanup delays

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Residents of almost 3,000 flood-affected Brisbane streets are still waiting for kerbside collection two weeks after floods rushed through many areas of the Queensland state capital. Long piles of now-smelly debris remain.

The delay in clearing ruined household possessions is one of the most visible sights of the ongoing abandonment of ordinary people by governments, and the stark contrast with the rescue and recovery efforts of the volunteers who rushed to help flood victims.

On Saturday March 5, a few days after the deluge, the city council told a 15,000-strong volunteer Mud Army to stand down after a single day of clean-up, saying the army and council workers would take over.

Lord Mayor Adrian Schrinner said there was a liability risk for the council and a safety risk for volunteers. But the result has been further delays in assisting flood victims, despite the influx of 1,500 military personnel. Mountains of foul-smelling flood debris have also remained in 10 suburban parks, which the council designated as temporary tips.

Thirteen people have so far been confirmed dead in southeast Queensland due to the floods, with 17 local government areas declared to be in a disaster. More than 20,000 Brisbane homes were inundated, with many rendered uninhabitable, plus 560 homes and businesses flooded in neighbouring Ipswich. Further north, in the regional city of Gympie, 420 homes were damaged with 240 severely affected, and more than 300 homes were damaged in Maryborough.

In Brisbane, over 18,000 property damage assessments have been undertaken, with 1,800 homes confirmed as severely damaged. Across the metropolitan areas, over 1,000 people from 461 households received emergency housing.

Compared to the floods that devastated Brisbane in

2011, which were worsened by releases from over-filled dams, most of the damage in this year's disaster was due to flash flooding. University of Sunshine Coast lecturer Margaret Cook told the media that suburban creeks played a major role this year, resulting in the flooding of areas that were not affected in 2011.

As in 2011, however, the worst-affected residents were in low-lying working-class suburbs where many people have moved because of sky-rocketing property prices and rents, often not being told of the flood risks by real estate agents and landlords.

Many people in these areas were not insured, due to the exorbitant premiums, or the refusal of the insurance giants to provide flood coverage. Insurance claims on cars, homes and businesses have exceeded \$1 billion, with 74,000 disaster claims made by Queensland residents.

The Financial Rights Legal Centre warned that thousands of affected victims would potentially be unable to claim on their insurance policies due to varying flood definitions and exclusions of particular types of damage, despite standard definitions supposedly being required after the many refusals by companies to pay victims of the 2011 floods.

The past week has seen escalating buck-passing between the federal Liberal-National Coalition government and the state Labor government, each trying to deflect the fury of victims and the wider public outrage onto the other.

Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk last week rejected an offer by the federal government to include the state in a national disaster emergency declaration, saying Prime Minister Scott Morrison's move came too late.

In what amounted to a denial of the continuing impact on tens of thousands of people, Palaszczuk said

the state's own local disaster declarations would be lifted last weekend. "The time for that national emergency was probably a week ago, so we've actually gone past that," she said. "The floodwaters have gone down, they've subsided."

Palaszcuk said Queensland had a very good disaster management and had utilised its own state specific disaster declarations for Gympie, Brisbane and Maryborough.

But the Labor government failed to adequately prepare or warn people in time for them to save their possessions and evacuate. Palaszcuk tried to shift the blame, claiming that weather forecasts had kept changing, even though the Bureau of Meteorology issued a specific warning on February 23 that a slow-moving low pressure system was dragging water from the sea and dumping it over the coastline.

Since the disaster struck, the victims have been largely abandoned by the local, state and federal governments, and left to fend for themselves with the help of neighbours and volunteers. Palaszcuk asked ordinary people to "dig deep" and donate to flood-affected households, starting a flood appeal with just \$2.1 million, a pittance compared to the losses that residents have suffered.

Last Thursday, Palaszcuk called for the use of the federal government's Emergency Response Fund (ERF). That fund now totals nearly \$5 billion but has allocated only \$150 million to flood mitigation projects, while governments have handed billions of dollars to business in COVID pandemic and flood support packages.

However, Morrison insisted flood mitigation was "primarily a state responsibility." He said the ERF "wasn't an unlimited fund and priorities were set and decisions were made."

Questions are also being raised about how the inadequacy of the Wivenhoe Dam, to the west of Brisbane, may have contributed to this year's floods, during which rainfall exceeded 1,000mm (40 inches) in three days across more than 30 locations in southeast Queensland.

The dam has not met national safety guidelines for large dams since 2002, further documented by findings from an official enquiry into the 2011 floods that the dam's design contributed to the flooding of 20,000 homes in Brisbane that year.

No major efforts to bring the dam up to international standards have been completed, including a proposed \$900 million upgrade to raise its wall by four metres, increasing its capacity by a million megalitres of water.

That proposal was made after studies by engineering firm URS in 2014 found that the dam's failure would risk 300,000 residents downstream, with a potential for 400 deaths and damage of up to \$100 billion.

No work has been carried out on the project, despite this assessment, with the government's Wivenhoe manager, SEQWater, insisting that it would not be completed until 2030.



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