

# Australian floods victims left homeless while aid goes to business

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Three weeks after floods engulfed Lismore and other communities across northeastern New South Wales (NSW), the federal and state governments continue to leave thousands of now-often homeless people to fend for themselves, after having failed to protect or even rescue them from the catastrophe in the first place.

A major social disaster is taking place. So far, over 3,600 homes across the region have been deemed uninhabitable by State Emergency Service (SES) assessors. Thousands more will be unliveable for months. Yet the governments have offered only pittance in temporary aid, most of which is yet to materialise.

By contrast, a joint federal-state support package announced late last week will pour another \$725 million into the hands of businesses, large and small. That is almost three times the money allocated to a joint \$285 million “temporary housing support package” that will supposedly help 25,000 flood-affected residents. Of that, \$248 million will be spent on providing just 16 weeks of “rental support,” which will mainly benefit landlords.

The hostility among ordinary people toward the response of the governments has been heightened by the revelation that the Triple Zero emergency service was switched to a recorded message as the floodwaters swept through Lismore in the early hours of February 28, endangering the lives of thousands of people.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of desperate pleas for help went unanswered. That left people trapped in roof cavities or sitting on rooftops for many hours. Most were rescued by local people, who risked their own lives by launching boats, kayaks and jet skis into the raging waters.

Those residents, or their anxious family members, who still had a dry phone and service to call 000 were told via a recorded message: “Emergency Triple Zero in New South Wales is extremely busy due to extreme weather conditions. If you require Police, Fire or Ambulance attendance please stay on the line. For State Emergency Service call 132 500, for non-emergency police assistance call 131 444.”

When people rang the SES number, they were met with

another recorded message telling them they would receive a call-back. For the majority, that call-back took several hours, even days. Another SES recorded message urged people to instead try 000!

Nevertheless, government leaders and agency chiefs justified the decision to switch the emergency line to a recorded message. Communications and Security Commander for the NSW Police, Assistant Commissioner Stacey Maloney, said the Triple Zero recorded message was played to “facilitate a timely response to calls from people requiring emergency assistance.”

The SES said it was completely over-run, with 374 calls for help in just 30 minutes on that morning, so its volunteers had to prioritise requests. By the following day, there had been an estimated 2,000 calls for assistance across the Northern Rivers region. It is impossible to know how many attempted calls did not make it through.

Outside Lismore, entire communities were left in communication isolation for days, unable to even make calls to Triple Zero. From Coraki and Woodburn—towns south of Lismore—all the way north to Murwillumbah and Tweed Heads, all electricity, phone and internet services were lost as the floodwaters rose rapidly.

At the peak of the floods around 83,000 National Broadband Network (NBN) internet services were cut, mostly caused by power outages, some of which lasted until March 6. That represents a substantial portion of the region’s population of more than 300,000.

When asked who people should blame for the lack of resourcing that resulted in mass civilian-led rescues, Prime Minister Scott Morrison told the local media: “I think we have to be realistic that in any natural disaster, we don’t have those resources just waiting around the corner. There will be a community response because the community is already there.”

This reiterated a wider message, already seen in the 2019–20 bushfire disaster and the worsening COVID-19 pandemic: Don’t expect governments to protect you. As climate-related emergencies become more frequent, you

must cope by yourselves.

Then it was further revealed that in November 2020, 12 SES units in the Northern Rivers wrote to the SES commissioner warning that the closure of regional offices as a result of NSW government budget cuts “threaten[ed] the continued existence of units... and the future of the service.”

The units said the cost-cutting changes were “undermining morale, cutting unit membership numbers and throwing up barriers to what we see as our essential roles as emergency service volunteers within and for our communities.”

That helps explain why, when the Wilson River swamped Lismore, the SES—a government agency staffed almost entirely by volunteers—had only two rescue boats on hand. In the 2018 budget, the then NSW treasurer and now premier, Dominic Perrottet, increased the “efficiency dividend” for government departments from 2 percent to 3 percent, forcing a SES “restructure.”

Across the region, thousands of people are still living in makeshift conditions, either in the homes of friends and families, paid accommodation or in poor conditions in a Lismore evacuation centre, where the crowding has caused COVID outbreaks.

The 120 totally inadequate small campervans promised by the NSW government are mostly yet to arrive or are unable to be used because linen and water sources have not been organised. Likewise, promised housing “pods”—shipping containers to house people trying to repair their homes—are yet to be seen.

On Thursday, facing a huge backlash, Morrison’s federal Liberal-National government reversed its previous refusal to extend small emergency financial grants to residents in four badly-affected local government areas: Ballina, Byron, Tweed and Kyogle. Yet, the tripling of payments from \$1,000 per adult to \$3,000 over the next two fortnights will hardly make a difference to people who face ruin, mostly because they could not obtain or afford flood insurance.

To add insult to injury, the government said it would just slightly dip into its Emergency Response Fund (ERF) to pay for flood mitigation measures, after weeks of criticism for refusing to allocate funds from the \$4 billion fund, which has accrued nearly an extra billion dollars in interest.

Emergency Management Minister Bridget McKenzie announced on Friday that just \$150 million from the ERF would be spent on community recovery and work to lessen future disasters.

In a separate announcement, Morrison and McKenzie said the federal government would split costs 50-50 with the NSW government for a support package for business. That is on top of an unspecified “bespoke business support package” already handed to Norco, a large regional dairy company, on March 9 as “a key employer.”

Of the \$742 million in the latest package, \$50 million will go to “large businesses and major employers.” Medium-sized businesses can access grants of up to \$200,000 for clean-up and repairs, while small businesses can get up to \$10,000.

Similarly, nearly \$200 million will go to primary producers and rural landowners. Finally, the package includes \$142 million for assessment and possible demolition of damaged properties.

Meanwhile, flood victims have endured primitive conditions inside Lismore’s temporary evacuation centre at the city’s Southern Cross University campus. About 500 people were crammed in the centre after the closure of another at a recreation facility. Now the government is moving to shut the sole remaining centre.

One person in the evacuation centre said she was enduring “sleepless nights” because people were “walking the floor all night making coffee and tea” and “there is an air con that sounds like a plane flying in running 24/7 and people coughing, snoring and talking all night long.” There were “new COVID cases daily and a gastro bug going around.”

Evacuees had access to government and charity services, “but the wait line is long.” Her neighbour “spent five hours waiting after being the fourth person in line, arriving an hour before they opened.”

On Thursday, she reported: “We have now been informed that the cafeteria is closed to us as the uni is back. We will receive packaged meals from now on and the only coffee station is in our block. They are asking our plans for moving on, as they are trying to wrap it up here.”

The lack of aid for the flood victims stands in stark contrast to the Morrison government’s rapid shipment of hundreds of millions of dollars worth of lethal weapons to Ukraine, backed by the Labor Party, to fuel the US-NATO intervention against Russia.



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