

Thousands of people lose everything in New Zealand floods

Tom Peters
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Four days after ex-Tropical Cyclone Gabrielle hit New Zealand, it is clear that the storm has caused unprecedented devastation across much of the North Island, affecting hundreds of thousands of people.

The death toll stands at eight, including two firefighters and a two-year-old child. This is in addition to four deaths in earlier flooding, mainly in Auckland. Prime Minister Chris Hipkins told the media on Thursday afternoon, “we do need to prepare for the likelihood that there will be more fatalities.”

The worst-hit regions are the Hawke’s Bay and Gisborne/Tairāwhiti on the East Coast, an area with about 234,000 people. Parts of Auckland, the country’s biggest city, Northland, Bay of Plenty, Waikato, the Coromandel, Taupo, Taranaki and Wairarapa have also suffered serious flooding and landslides.

An estimated 10,500 people have been made homeless, including 9,000 in Hawke’s Bay, but the real number is probably far higher. Dozens of communities remain geographically cut off, with little or no communications. There are now 62,000 houses without power and more than 4,500 people have been reported to police as uncontactable.

Wairoa, population 9,000, was finally accessed yesterday by road. *Newshub* reported that the town is “under a sea of mud... street after street, home after home smothered in deep silt after the river burst its banks and swept through town.” Residents confronted “loss on an unimaginable scale.”

About 500 people in Te Karaka, near Gisborne, had to flee their homes. “The water was swift. My house filled up within like five minutes,” Alicia told *One News*. “We went up the hill and then watched it unfold in front of us, watched our town basically get drowned,” another resident said.

This morning, Civil Defence in Gisborne (population

37,700) posted on Facebook that the back-up water treatment plant had failed and instructed residents: “STOP ALL WATER USE NOW! This is a major crisis, our city has no water. Don’t turn your taps on.”

The city of Napier, home to 65,000 people, remains without power after a substation in the suburb of Redclyffe was flooded. The substation, located by a river, was identified by the state-owned transmission company Transpower as critically at risk in 2020, but nothing was done to upgrade it.

Radio NZ yesterday reported there is rising anger in Napier about the disorganised official disaster response. “There were no signs to show us where to go. It’s just total disorganisation,” said Paul, one of several people forced to sleep in their cars due to an evacuation centre not being open. Residents are reportedly queuing for kilometres to obtain fuel and supermarkets are rationing their remaining supplies.

The impact of the cyclone will add to what were already soaring levels of social inequality, homelessness and poverty. As well as destroying houses, roads, railway lines and other infrastructure, the flooding has killed livestock and swept away farm buildings, orchards and food crops. This will push up food prices, which already surged by more than 10 percent last year.

No announcements have been made about long-term plans for housing the thousands of people who cannot return to their homes, or replacing uninsured vehicles and other essential items.

Debbie Munroe, who runs the Waka of Caring charity in Manurewa, South Auckland, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the past few weeks had been “absolutely crazy. We usually do between 100 and 150 food parcels a day. We’re up to 200 food parcels.” They were also distributing blankets and clothing to people who had

“lost everything” in the floods and had travelled from as far away as Dargaville in Northland.

Munroe said many people had visited her centre after seeking help from government agencies and facing long delays and bureaucratic obstacles. “One lady came in and said she sat on the phone for four hours, with continuous ringing and people weren’t picking up.”

Others said they faced too many questions when seeking emergency grants. “The last thing you want to do is sit down and explain to somebody why you need something. Our people have hit rock bottom. They don’t want questions, they just want help.”

Munroe explained that many people were already struggling before the floods. “What I’ve noticed here is we get a lot more working people now that have enough to pay for their rent, power, internet, gas, then they say: ‘Debbie, I’ve got \$3 left to feed my family.’ It’s not just beneficiaries. If you get too many [emergency grants from the government] they make you go to a budgeter. How the hell do you budget if you’ve only got \$3 left?”

She praised the work of local people and volunteers. “Manurewa copes really well, we’re a bunch of strong stubborn people. A lot of people have opened up their doors and fed people and let people stay with them.”

Munroe said the clean-up and recovery efforts would likely “go on for months,” adding that rubbish was a significant issue “because people can’t afford to take it to the dump or don’t have the means to take it to the dump.”

Another major concern, she said, was that landlords would use the housing shortage “to try and put the rent up.” She predicted that “we’re going to have more homeless people,” and called on the Ministry of Social Development to “step up and put [displaced families] into motels, where at least they’re together, they can cook.”

Many people have been forced to shelter in crowded evacuation centres, where there is a heightened risk of spreading COVID-19 and other diseases.

Finance Minister Grant Robertson told Today FM yesterday the total cost of the storm was hard to predict, but compared it to the devastating 2011 Christchurch earthquake, which destroyed much of the city centre and entire suburbs. Tens of thousands of people spent years fighting insurance companies to try and repair their homes or relocate. Many were plunged into

poverty and never recovered. The total cost of the Christchurch rebuild was about \$40 billion.

In the days following the floods, the government has allocated the meagre sums of \$11.5 million for NGOs and food banks, \$4 million for farmers and rural communities and \$2 million for relief efforts on the East Coast. It has also mobilised about 700 military personnel after declaring a national state of emergency.

Robertson said the government would have to borrow money to rebuild infrastructure. Inevitably, as with the Christchurch earthquake, the interests of big business will be prioritised and the cost will be borne by working people, through budget cuts to healthcare, education and other essential services.



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