

Thousands still isolated one week after devastating floods in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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One week after much of New Zealand's North Island was devastated by Cyclone Gabrielle, it is clear that the storm was the country's most destructive event since the 2010–2011 Christchurch earthquakes, and the worst weather-related disaster this century.

Yesterday the Labour Party government extended its state of emergency for flood-affected areas for another week. There were still 15,000 properties without power, mostly in Napier and Hastings. This morning police reported that 1,700 people are still unaccounted for. Many communities remain cut off due to impassable roads in the Hawke's Bay, Gisborne, East Cape, Northland and Coromandel regions.

The death toll stands at 11, with the government warning that this is likely to increase further.

Questions have been raised about why places that are prone to flooding like the Esk Valley in the Hawke's Bay, where many properties were destroyed and a two-year-old girl drowned, were not evacuated before the storm.

On Monday at 8.33 p.m., the Hawke's Bay Civil Defence and Emergency Management issued a notice saying: "If evacuation is required overnight, teams will be deployed to advise residents." People could also self-evacuate, "if you feel concerned." According to *Stuff*, "evacuations were under way at 3.19 a.m.," but by then the Esk Valley was already inundated.

In nearby Puketapu, a family with several children, including a nine-month-old baby, climbed onto the roof at 5.00 a.m., watching as the water swept away vehicles below. The mother repeatedly called emergency services who told her help was on the way, but it never arrived. The group were rescued by neighbours more than six hours later.

The mother told Radio NZ (RNZ): "I was really disappointed... you hear on the news that, you know,

they're congratulating themselves for rescuing everybody and it's like, 'No, I could've died.'"

The fact that so many people remain isolated and have not been contacted since the February 13–14 storm raises serious concerns about their welfare.

Many are on the East Cape, where the only highway connecting dozens of villages has been severely damaged. This was entirely predictable: the road is poorly maintained and notoriously vulnerable to flooding and slips. Despite several days' warning about the approaching cyclone, preparations were not made to support communities that would be cut off for a week or longer.

Midwife Corrina Parata told *Stuff* she had to walk for hours on Sunday to take supplies to a pregnant woman in the isolated Mangahauini Valley on the East Cape. "The stress levels and anxiety levels can pose problems for expectant mothers," Parata said. "It's been quite concerning not being able to see women with high-risk pregnancies on a normal, regular basis."

The region's small Te Puia Springs Hospital, which accommodates dementia patients, remained in a severe crisis on Sunday. Hospital services coordinator Ra Campbell told *Stuff* it still had "no running water, no toilets, nowhere to wash. Everyone's starting to get diarrhoea, vomiting, everything like that is starting now." The water supply has since been restored after a generator was flown to the hospital by helicopter.

In Tokomaru Bay, another cut-off town, some supplies have been delivered by the military, but residents told *Stuff* they were not being distributed fairly. "I haven't seen a loaf of bread in four days... nobody knows where it's going," one person said.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Hamish, a service station worker in Napier, where tens of thousands of people are still without power after a

substation was flooded. Hamish, who worked as a relief worker for the Red Cross during previous flooding in 2020, said his house has avoided significant damage, but Eskdale and surrounding areas (population 2,673 according to the most recent census) is largely uninhabitable, with homes and businesses buried in silt. He said he was planning to volunteer to help with the clean-up operation.

“I think we all could have had a lot more notice” to evacuate, he said. At his workplace, two staff members were manning the night shift when the storm hit and power and internet went out around 11.15 p.m. “They weren’t getting any contact from anybody to say whether they should stay or go, so they stayed working until 5.00 a.m., when my manager came in” and told them to leave. “They started to lock everything up and they got the alert on their phones from Civil Defence saying the banks had broken.”

Damage to roads and bridges means supply chains will remain disrupted for some time, Hamish said. “Supermarkets are always going to be left bare because they can’t keep up with demand. You’re going to have workers wanting to fix roads but they’ve got nothing to fix them with” because of equipment being used elsewhere.

Hamish is convinced that a large amount of the damage could have been avoided. Across the Hawke’s Bay and East Coast, debris known as slash from the multi-billion dollar logging industry was washed down rivers, forming dams and diverting the flow of water so “it got pushed out sideways and it flooded townships.” Videos posted on social media show road bridges collapsing during the storm under the weight of accumulated slash.

“It’s ridiculous how much has come down,” Hamish said. “I went to the beach just across the road from my work after everything happened. A week ago it had a few stones and maybe one or two logs you could sit on. It’s now absolutely littered with slash, it’s horrendous.”

Forestry consultant Allan Laurie told RNZ this morning that it was a “huge challenge” to solve the problem of slash while ensuring that the logging industry remains profitable. It could not be done without “major investment from [the] government,” he said.

Journalist Mike Smith said the problem stemmed

from 1987, when the Labour Party-led government split what was then the state-owned Forest Service into two entities: the Forestry Corporation, which was run as a business, and the Conservation Department. The country’s forests were subsequently privatised and deregulated, and the industry is now one of the most dangerous, with frequent reports of worker deaths and serious injuries.

Hamish told the WSWS that Napier remains extremely vulnerable if it is hit by more severe weather in coming weeks. This happened in Auckland, which experienced unprecedented rainfall and flooding on January 27 and again with Cyclone Gabrielle.

“If that happens, we’re not ready. That power station in Redclyffe, they’re still trying to clear the mud out of the machines to see the extent of the damage. What power the city is getting is hanging on a fine wire.”

The MetService website is currently warning of a possible “extended period of rain for the east coast of the North Island, including Gisborne and Hawke’s Bay,” starting on Thursday.



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