

Australia: Unprecedented Queensland floods cause widespread damage and suffering

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Days of torrential rain and floods at levels far exceeding previous records have devastated hundreds of homes in the tropical far-north of the Australian state of Queensland. Many communities are still isolated and without power and communications.

What began as an unusually early summer season category 2 cyclone, named Jasper, stalled over the Cape York Peninsula, Australia's northern tip. Over five days, the ex-cyclone dumped unprecedented torrential rain, triggering flash floods and landslides. Some rain is still falling and the full extent of the damage is yet to emerge.

As invariably happens in such disasters, people in low-lying areas, including in northern parts of the major regional city of Cairns, and in the indigenous township of Wujal Wujal, about 175 kilometres north of Cairns, have been worst affected.

In several communities some residents, including patients at the Wujal Wujal health clinic, had to sit on roofs in the pouring rain for more than a day before being rescued.

The flood disaster has again exposed the lack of official preparations for such extreme weather events, which are becoming more frequent globally due to climate change, as scientists have warned for years.

Many residents were caught unprepared and then left stranded. Key highways and other roads are cut off or partly washed away. Cairns airport was partly under water and shut for two days, stranding thousands of people and hampering rescue efforts. As of last night, more than 14,000 homes still had no electricity.

Late last Wednesday, the cyclone was downgraded to a tropical low. It crossed southern Cape York Peninsula and headed toward the Gulf of Carpentaria. By Friday, local tourist agencies and operators announced they were back in business, inviting visitors back to the

region.

By Saturday morning, however, a rainfall and flood emergency was unfolding.

Cyclones are not unusual in this region. Yet the scale and intensity of this deluge has exceeded all predictions. On Saturday, the Bureau of Meteorology forecast that Cairns faced "possible heavy falls" of 30-130 millimetres. Instead, the city's 150,000 people were drenched by a historic 268mm within 24 hours.

Between last Thursday and this morning, many areas along the northeastern coast from the town of Tully to Cape Melville (a distance of about 600 kilometres) had received between 400 and 1,000 millimetres of rainfall. There were localised falls of up to two metres between Cairns and the northern township of Cooktown (about 170 kilometres away). In many cases, that is more than the usual annual rainfall.

At least 12 locations posted record rainfall totals. Black Mountain near Cooktown recorded a cumulative 2,189mm over five days, while Mossman South, an hour northwest of Cairns, had 1,935mm.

Water levels in Cairns' Barron River far exceeded the previous record set by destructive floods in March 1977. Further north, the Daintree River swelled to 15 metres, more than 2 metres higher than the earlier 118-year-old flood level, recorded in 2019.

Since the 1977 Barron River disaster in Cairns, considerable residential and commercial development has been permitted across the river's floodplain. That is just one example of the prioritising of corporate profit calculations over human safety and need, especially for working-class people seeking affordable housing.

As in previous catastrophes, the inadequacy of civilian infrastructure and emergency services meant that residents were left to fend for themselves, or had to be rescued by local volunteers. Complaints are growing

that people were abandoned.

In Cairns, Holloways Beach resident Dan Bateman suddenly lost his home, and had to wait with 30 other people in teeming rain for several hours for rescue boats to arrive. “We could see how fast the water was flowing. We had to dodge fridges floating past, big branches,” he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

Douglas Shire mayor Michael Kerr, whose municipal council covers part of the region to the north of Cairns, told the ABC: “This has been an absolute nightmare for us and we have communities that we can’t get to help... We have flooded houses there and we are trying to evacuate them, but we don’t have the resources, unfortunately.”

The Queensland State Emergency Service received more than 1,000 requests for assistance in 24 hours, while Fire and Rescue Service swift water firefighters responded to more than 370 call outs in the same hours, Queensland Fire and Emergency Services said.

Once again, the state and federal Labor governments called in the military, although the assistance failed to fill the gap. Four helicopters were dispatched from the army base at Townsville, 400 kilometres south of Cairns, and some dinghies were deployed from HMAS Cairns, a naval base in the city.

As yet, no lives have been reported lost. The health situation could worsen, however. Queensland Health warned that a “cocktail of contaminants” in floodwaters increased the danger of diseases such as leptospirosis and melioidosis as well as wound infections, diarrhoea and conjunctivitis.

The Federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese activated a federal disaster assistance program, but the help is minimal. Grants of \$180 for individuals and up to \$900 for a family of five or more can be sought to cover the costs of essentials such as food, clothing and medicine.

While individual extreme weather events cannot be traced directly to global warming, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports have warned that catastrophic flooding is becoming more likely.

Writing on the *Conversation*, Steve Turton, Adjunct Professor of Environmental Geography at Central Queensland University, explained: “The atmosphere and oceans are warming due to increasing emissions of greenhouse gasses, largely caused by burning fossil

fuels. This has led to a greater risk of extreme rainfall and flooding, such as the events we’re seeing now in far north Queensland.

“For every 1°C rise in average global temperature, the atmosphere can hold an extra 7 percent water vapour. When the right atmospheric ‘triggers’ are in place, this extra water vapour is released as intense rainfall.

“It’s too soon to attribute the current extreme rain and flooding to climate change. But as the world continues to warm, such events will become more frequent and severe. Already, extreme flood events globally are becoming more regular and their magnitude is breaking many long-term rainfall and river flood records.”

Coming on top of Australia’s 2019–20 bushfire catastrophe, the 2022 floods in Sydney, Brisbane and the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the current floods have again laid bare the failure of capitalist governments, whether Labor or Liberal-National, to take the necessary steps to protect the population from such disasters.

Essential services that have been run down over decades have not been able to cope, leaving people to depend on the sometimes dangerous and heroic efforts of fellow residents.

This disaster is also part of a wider social and housing crisis. Successive governments, at the behest of property developers, have allowed further housing projects in areas susceptible to floods and fires.

Because of soaring rents, mortgage payments and house prices, and falling real wages, working-class families often have no option but to live in these areas. According to the Insurance Council of Australia, 2 to 3 percent of homes nationally are today in frequent flood zones and 15 percent are susceptible to flood. That means up to 1.5 million households are living in danger.



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