

Australian governments prioritise business over residents in north Queensland flood disaster

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The full extent of the damage and human toll is still emerging from the unprecedented floods that suddenly struck communities in the northernmost part of Queensland just before Christmas, following Cyclone Jasper.

Hundreds of homes have been partially or totally ruined. Piles of furniture and household goods remain on streets as residents clear out mud from their houses. Others are living in evacuation facilities.

Some roads remain blocked by landslips north of the regional city of Cairns. Crews around Port Douglas and Mossman, up the coast from Cairns, are still working to restore essential services, including water.

According to a Cairns Regional Council spokesperson, about 1,400 homes in Cairns alone suffered some sort of flood damage.

Despite all this, and wild storms continuing along the continent's entire eastern coast, the federal and Queensland state Labor governments have urged tourists to visit far north Queensland without delay, supposedly to assist recovery.

At a joint press conference in Cairns on December 22, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Queensland Premier Steven Miles declared that the area was "open for business," even though much of its infrastructure was still in shambles.

They joined tourism industry figures in calling on tourists to avoid cancelling their bookings during the Christmas holidays, saying the industry could lose \$125 million during that period.

Labor's focus on preserving tourism and other profits was underscored when Albanese and Miles announced a \$64 million package of business-related grants. That was \$25 million for primary producers, \$25 million for small business and not-for-profits, \$9 million for local municipal councils and \$5 million for tourism operators, plus an advertising campaign to keep tourists arriving over summer.

By contrast, despite thousands of affected people losing homes or having to do significant repairs to make them liveable, the federal government has offered only one-off

payments of \$1,000 per adult, and \$400 per dependent child, for those who have suffered a serious injury or have a severely damaged or destroyed home because of the flooding.

Miles said his state government had also made a \$1.5 million donation to a charity flood appeal. That is a pittance compared to the need.

After making landfall on December 13, Cyclone Jasper resulted in massive rainfall over five days in Cairns, a city of 150,000, and across the Cape York Peninsula. The total exceeded 2 metres in some areas affected, the equivalent of one year's worth of rain in less than one week.

The result has been widespread disruption and suffering, with 40,000 households losing power within 24 hours of the cyclone's landfall. One fatality has been recorded as of writing and two people are missing. Dwellings in some remote communities are still to be assessed.

A hydropower station was damaged by the storms and is estimated to need six months of repairs, exacerbating electricity shortfalls in the region. There are also fears that the runoff from the floods will harm the offshore Great Barrier Reef.

Remote communities have been especially affected. Often they have been neglected by governments for decades, leaving them little infrastructure with which to prepare or evacuate in event of natural disasters.

Such was the case of Wujal Wujal, an indigenous community of 300. It was completely inundated, forcing residents onto the roofs of buildings to avoid rising floodwaters. In one instance, nine people, including a sick seven-year-old child, were forced onto the roof of the local clinic.

Despite their desperate circumstances, Wujal Wujal residents were denied rescue for as much as five days as conditions were deemed unsafe by the Queensland government, which had taken no steps to evacuate them before the cyclone hit.

Criticising the lack of assistance to Wujal Wujal, deputy mayor Rejan Kulka noted: “There’s nobody here for us, we’re here on our own, there’s no ED at the hospital, the power is off, there’s no food in the store. We’re just being forgotten.”

Across the region, residents, some trapped on rooftops or in trees, had to depend on fellow residents to rescue them using little boats and, in one case, a cattle mustering helicopter in which a pilot saved 18 people from a roof.

Reports emerged from more remote communities. In Julatten, 81-year-old Bette Brandon was stuck on the top floor of her two-storey home for three days. She was finally rescued by two young men in a small boat.

Rossville resident Gavin Dear told the *Guardian* on December 20: “Emergency services are only arriving now. All the rescuing, all the looking after people, sheltering them, has been done locally.”

People in Daintree, near Port Douglas, north of Cairns, spent seven days without power, water, communications and with limited food dropped by helicopter.

Many residents were blind-sided by the intensity of the floods. Though cyclones in the region are not unusual, this shock and surprise reflects the lack of official warnings and the failure of the governments to prepare to evacuate vulnerable communities likely to be trapped in floods.

The Bureau of Meteorology has been criticised for downgrading the threat posed by Jasper. Of greater impact, however, once the prolonged downpours began, was the inadequacy of warning systems.

Australian Warning System text messages were often sent to those without power or cellular reception or sent too late to be of any use. Residents of flooded beachside suburbs north of Cairns, including Holloways Beach and Machans Beach, reported receiving flood warnings only at 9am on December 17, despite access roads being cut from about 9pm the previous evening.

Federal Emergency Management Minister Murray Watt said the Albanese government was working on a new warning system following similar complaints about disaster alerts during the southeast Queensland and northern New South Wales (NSW) floods in 2022.

Watt admitted that warning systems “fell short.” But he said the replacement system was only expected to be available from the end of 2024. Even if that deadline is met, it is more than a year away.

Meteorology is not a perfectly precise science. The exact course of Cyclone Jasper may have been difficult to determine, but climate scientists said the possibility of a slow-moving storm like Jasper hitting north Queensland had been understood for some time, and this risk had been exacerbated by climate change.

Dr. Andrew Dowdy, an expert on tropical cyclones at the University of Melbourne, told the *Guardian*: “A slow-moving tropical cyclone can cause a lot more rain in a particular region, as compared to if a cyclone was moving faster with that rain spread over a wider region.”

Dr. Andrew King, also a climate scientist at the University of Melbourne, noted that increasing global temperatures would provide more energy to cyclones through evaporated water vapour. He warned that for every degree increase in temperature, rainfall from storms could increase in Australia by more than 15 percent.

The disaster also laid bare underlying socio-economic issues, including the housing crisis that forces working-class people into low-lying, flood-prone areas.

Before Cyclone Jasper, Cairns already faced an acute housing shortage, with a vacancy rate of less than 1 percent. With thousands of houses damaged, this shortage will worsen dramatically, increasing homelessness or forcing people to leave the region entirely.

Conflicts with insurance companies are underway as well. As of December 22, about 4,600 claims had been made, mostly lodged by home and contents policy holders. In the Brisbane floods of 2022, more than 650 insurance policy holders were denied flood claims due to exclusions, the Australian Financial Complaints Authority reported earlier this year.

Insurers have made it plain they will not re-insure many flood victims. Premiums are certain to rise. A federal government scheme introduced in 2022 to minimise insurance premiums only covers damage in the first 48 hours of a cyclone, which in Jasper’s case would be just half the total period of severe rainfall.

This disaster comes on top of Australia’s 2019–20 bushfire catastrophe, the 2022 floods in Sydney, Brisbane and the Northern Rivers region of NSW, and the resurging COVID-19 pandemic.

Far from addressing the root causes, including climate change, and protecting ordinary people, the Labor governments, like capitalist governments everywhere, are preoccupied with bolstering profits.



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