

Australia: Flooding devastates northern Queensland, two confirmed dead

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7 February 2025

For over a week, towns in northern Queensland have been devastated by intense flooding that have so far killed at least two people and have driven hundreds more from their homes.

From January 28 onwards, the severe flooding event has mostly impacted the cities of Townsville and Ingham, around 1,500 km north of Queensland's capital city of Brisbane. The rainfall levels, though not officially forming cyclones, were compared to cyclone levels by the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM).

By February 2, hard-hit areas recorded over 1m (40 inches) of rain in 48 hours. One resident of South Mission Beach near Cairns reported 600mm of rain in 12 hours.

The flood levels are close to record levels. The Herbert River rose at one point to 14.89 metres, only half a metre shy of the record level of 15.2 metres caused by Cyclone Dinah in 1967.

Two deaths have been confirmed so far. The first was a 63-year-old woman who died last Sunday morning when an emergency services boat was capsized after hitting a tree. The second was when the body of an 82-year-old woman was tragically found on Tuesday in cane fields.

The town of Ingham, close to where the elderly woman was found dead, was hit particularly hard. Homes were cut off from running water when the water treatment plant malfunctioned from the floodwaters. The Ingham substation was also switched off from floodwaters on Tuesday, affecting thousands of people. Power was restored for a number of residents on Friday afternoon, but there remain about 5,000 homes that are still without power.

Hundreds of emergency calls have been made for flooding, evacuations, felled trees, and leaking home ceilings. According to the Insurance Council of Australia, at least 2,500 claims have been made for flood damages to homes. Those who have been unable to return to their flooded homes have been sleeping in accommodation shelters, and in some cases in tents or in their cars.

Towns have also been isolated and cut off from crucial supplies. The Ollera Creek Bridge on the Bruce Highway

collapsed from the flooding, cutting off the route of supplies to regions north of the bridge.

The threat for the region is far from over. Senior meteorologist for the BOM Dean Narramore stated on Friday that “over the next three or four days we could see falls of 100mm to 200mm over northern Queensland.” Another senior meteorologist, Sarah Scully, stated that by Saturday “we are expecting there to be a burst of widespread heavy rainfall about the northeast tropical Queensland coast extending further inland.”

There remains the potential for Ingham and Townsville to face life-threatening flash flooding over the weekend. The Herbert River, which has flooded the town of Ingham, remains categorised with a “major flood warning” by the BOM. Scully stated that the heavy expected rainfall will likely result in “rapid rises and lead to a return of more significant flooding across the Townsville area.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has received comments from Townsville residents. Rebecca spoke on the numerous other disasters that preceded the most recent floods, including the 2019 Townsville floods, which “saw widespread road closures in suburban streets, some houses inundated and people in ‘black zones’ urged to leave” including her son who lived in an area where houses were “swamped to their roofs.”

The “black zones” encompass low-lying working-class suburbs, that in these floods as in 2019 have been issued with evacuation notices.

Rebecca added that record temperatures from climate change “spells disaster for humans, for the environment and all the animals, for the Great Barrier Reef, food security and the planet. Prior to this flood event, Townsville endured a withering heat wave. That heat wave heats the oceans that are already greenhouse gas sinks, warms the air, causes humidity and a build-up of clouds, meaning much more rain.”

Mal also drew comparisons to the 2019 floods. “Many houses were flooded for the second time in five years, and most will become uninsurable, and some declared

unliveable... many are climate refugees in their own town.” Speaking on the class divide that is evident during these kinds of extreme weather catastrophes, he said “only wealthy people can afford the higher ground for their homes.”

Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese visited Townsville late last week, following a trip by Queensland’s conservative Premier David Crisafulli. Both issued phony professions of concern for the population and claimed that their respective governments would provide flood victims with assistance.

There are acute fears that, amid a crisis of the federal Labor government and the entire political establishment, the flood crisis could inflame broader social anger and opposition.

That is what occurred in early 2022, when then Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared that flood victims in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales were essentially on their own. Working people across the country were shocked by the scenes of ordinary people having to rescue one another in the city of Lismore and elsewhere. Within months, Morrison was voted out.

Albanese’s visit does not mark any substantive shift however. Monetary assistance from the federal Labor government has been entirely inadequate. Individuals can claim \$180, and families of five or more \$900, in emergency payment grants. The same minimal assistance was given out only two months prior in December 2023, when northern Queensland faced unprecedented flooding, particular in the city of Cairns.

More generally, nothing has been done to address the absence of any nationally-coordinated approach or resourcing to increasingly frequent natural disasters. Nor has any action been taken on planning issues and a housing crisis that compels mostly poorer layers to live on flood plains. Instead, Labor’s policies have centred on ensuring a bonanza for the property developers and the banks, amid the deepest housing and cost-of-living crisis in decades.

Extreme weather events like these are becoming more and more frequent. The Sixth Assessment Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released in 2023 found, with high confidence, that the “frequency and intensity of heavy precipitation events have increased since the 1950s over most land areas for which observational data are sufficient for trend analysis.”

It is too early to definitively say to what extent this most recent flooding event can be directly traced to the effects of climate change. However, climate scientists have long warned that the warming of the atmosphere can exacerbate the frequency and intensity of precisely these types of floods.

On February 2, professor of Environmental Geography and expert reviewer for the two most recent IPCC assessment reports, Steve Turton, explained:

“More extreme rainfall and higher frequencies of flooded rivers and flash floods around the world have a clear link to climate change and ongoing global heating. The main drivers behind these events include warming of the atmosphere. For every 1°C of warming, the atmosphere holds 7% more water vapour. Recent research suggests this figure could be even higher for short duration rainfall.”

The Australian “State of the Climate” report, released by the BOM as well as the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) in October 2023, warned that the warming of Australia “has led to an increase in the frequency of extreme heat events over land and in the oceans.” It warned of a projected increase in “more intense short-duration heavy rainfall events.”

The Labor government has ignored all those warnings, instead promoting the interests of the mining barons. Late last year, the Albanese government approved a string of coal mine expansions that brought the total number of coal mine approvals by this government to ten. Collectively, the ten approvals are estimated to result in the equivalent of 2,449 megatons of CO2 emissions over their lifetime.

That is entirely incompatible with limiting global warming to 1.5C, a goal increasingly out of reach given the fact that 2024 was the first calendar year that average global temperatures exceeded that limit.

There is enough wealth in society to drastically cut fossil fuel emissions, stave off additional increments of global warming, and adequately fund the necessary adaptation measures to prevent or mitigate future flooding disasters, or any other extreme weather event. For this to occur, the working class must expropriate that wealth in a socialist transformation of society to ensure that those resources serve human need, not private profit.



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