

Cyclone Alfred hits major Australian population centre

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Tropical Cyclone Alfred, the first cyclone in 50 years to cross the southeast coast of Australia, has hit the country's third largest population centre, affecting nearly five million people in southeast Queensland, including the state capital Brisbane, and northern New South Wales (NSW).

Although it was downgraded overnight from a cyclone to a tropical low as it approached the mainland, the weather system still carries risks of intense rainfall and flooding, stretching inland from the battered coast. No deaths have yet been reported, but a 61-year-old man is missing in northern NSW after being lost in flood waters on Friday afternoon.

The full extent of the damage so far is not yet known, but some homes have been severely damaged by fallen trees or had their roofs lifted off by high winds.

More than 300,000 homes have lost power due to the storms, and some could be cut off electricity for a week or more. Around 250,000 of those are in Queensland, making it the biggest power outage in the state in over a decade. At least one major hospital—Gold Coast University Hospital—had to rely on back-up generators.

The worst impacts may be yet to come. The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM), the national weather and climate agency, has warned of "heavy rainfall, which may lead to flash flooding" over the weekend.

The scale of the disaster forced Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to abandon plans to announce an early federal election tomorrow for April 12. Instead, he will spend the coming days posturing as heading the official response, putting off an election until May.

Thousands of homeless people in Brisbane, the Gold Coast and surrounding areas are in danger from extreme rainfall and flood risks, as are working-class people living in flood-prone suburbs, many of whom have been denied or can no longer afford exorbitant insurance coverage.

Evacuation centres have been opened but both the

Queensland Liberal National Party government and the NSW Labor government have emphasised that these offer little comfort. NSW Premier Chris Minns, for example, declared:

"There are emergency evacuation centres that are located if there are no alternatives. We have to reiterate the message that these are more of a life raft rather than a cruise ship and the priority is to keep people safe during a difficult situation."

Some low-lying areas are already under water, including in the regional northern NSW city of Lismore, where the BOM is warning that major flooding is likely by later today. Parts of the city were devastated by floods in 2017 and 2022, causing immense anger with the lack of the federal and state government preparation and response.

As in the major floods that affected many of the same areas in 2022, the federal and state government responses have depended heavily on volunteers. Essential infrastructure and emergency services remain chronically under-funded, forcing people to rely on their own efforts.

So far, the largely volunteer-based State Emergency Service (SES) in NSW has responded to over 5,000 incidents, including 30 flood rescues in a 24-hour period. Approximately 20,000 people are under evacuation warnings in NSW, with potentially more expected as rivers continue to rise from heavy rainfall, posing risks of major flooding.

Basic infrastructure problems have developed. The M1, the main interstate highway linking Brisbane to Sydney, has been cut in places south of the Queensland-NSW border, presenting difficulties in transporting food and relief supplies to some areas.

Residents have complained that the 000 national emergency line is not operating in some locations, due to power and communications cuts. That highlights the lack of protective measures since the 2022 floods, after which the federal Albanese Labor government promised a

national alert system.

In May 2023, Communications Minister Michelle Rowland and then-emergency management minister Murray Watt pledged that a “National Messaging System” would be ready by the end of 2024 and would be able to override phone systems, regardless of the carrier, to ensure people received warnings. That has not happened.

Cyclone Alfred originated from a tropical low in the Coral Sea that was detected by the BOM on February 20. The last time a tropical cyclone made landfall so far south was Cyclone Zoe in March 1974. Most cyclones originating from the South Pacific drift away from the Australian mainland due to the typical eastward winds in that region.

The arrival of Cyclone Alfred onto land was repeatedly delayed, as it moved slower than initially expected. This could bring more than expected devastation, as the system’s slow-moving pace means it could linger over some locations and bring down even more rain before moving on.

The lack of an adequate civilian disaster force, despite repeated flood and bushfire disasters, was underscored when Albanese announced the deployment of some military troops to assist in the evacuation and deployment of sandbags. Some residents had to buy sandbags due to shortages and long queues to obtain those available.

Beyond immediate inadequate responses, successive Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments have exacerbated the climate crisis which poses the risk of intensifying the impacts of tropical cyclones. Cyclones require warm waters to form and be maintained; generally, water temperatures of at least 26.5 degrees Celsius (79.7 degrees Fahrenheit) are needed.

Climate change is rapidly warming up the oceans, which in 2024 reached their hottest levels on record globally. Specifically, the Coral Sea, where Cyclone Alfred first formed, had its hottest summer on record, with temperatures 1°C warmer than average.

It is far too early to say with any degree of scientific confidence what extent climate change has played in Cyclone Alfred’s development. As Australia’s national science agency CSIRO explained in a March 6 statement:

We can’t yet say if Alfred’s unusual path and slow speed are linked to climate change. But climate change is driving very clear trends which can load the dice for more intense cyclones

arriving in subtropical regions. These include the warm waters which fuel cyclones spreading further south, and cyclones dumping more rain than they used to.

One factor related to climate change that is likely to exacerbate the potential damage of cyclones is rising sea levels. Australian sea levels are approximately 22cm (about 9 inches) higher than levels observed in 1900, so storm surges from tropical cyclones are more likely to reach further inland.

The warmer atmosphere produced by global warming also holds more moisture that can fall as rain. The common figure cited is that for each 1°C of additional warming, the atmosphere can hold an average of 7 percent more moisture. Recent research indicates this is a considerable underestimation and could instead be double or even more.

These combined climate effects led to the warnings contained in the latest State of the Climate report from October 2024 of “fewer but more intense tropical cyclones.” The Albanese government has heightened that danger by approving 10 new coal mines or expansions to existing ones.

Over two years ago, the Socialist Equality Party published a statement on the floods that affected significant areas of Australia’s eastern Queensland and NSW and caused at least 16 deaths. As the statement documented, even though the rainstorms involved were extreme, this was not simply a “natural disaster.” The destructive outcomes were the result of profit-driven and cost-cutting political decisions, as well as the refusal of governments, Labor and Liberal-National governments alike, to take the necessary measures to halt climate change.

None of the basic political issues raised in that statement—lack of disaster preparation, inadequate and privatised infrastructure, housing development in flood-prone areas, prohibitive cost of disaster insurance, reliance on volunteers and the military, and climate change—have been addressed by governments since.



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