

Australia: Ex-Cyclone Alfred still threatens extreme weather

Mark Wilson
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Large bursts of intense rain and severe thunderstorms are posing a danger of flash and riverine flooding as ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred moves through parts of Brisbane and surrounding areas of south-east Queensland and into northern New South Wales (NSW).

Dozens of emergency flood alerts have been issued. Storm cells are causing potentially life-threatening conditions, now in the Lockyer Valley, west of Brisbane. There, the Warrego Highway was closed at Glenore Grove this morning, with homes and businesses expected to be affected by flooding in the coming hours.

Yesterday, more than 400 residents of Hervey Bay, north of Brisbane, called the State Emergency Service (SES) for help after heavy rain took the town by surprise. One resident recorded a staggering 363 millimetres (mm) of rain from the downpour. Parts of Brisbane experienced similar deluges.

Out of nearly half a million homes and businesses without electricity in both states last week, more than 200,000 remain cut off, some for nearly a week. This is causing difficulties and hardships for many households.

As of this morning, more than 150,000 properties are still in the dark in Brisbane and its suburbs, as well as 72,000 in the Gold Coast. In addition, more than 100 roads in Brisbane were blocked or cordoned off due to storm damage or inundation.

Governments are nevertheless rushing to reopen schools and public transport, urging people to get back to work. This is despite continued flooding in many areas, road closures, traffic light blackouts, fallen live power lines and homes damaged by high winds or downed trees.

Cyclone Alfred made its way onto mainland Australia on Saturday night, the first cyclone in more than 50

years to cross the southeast coast, threatening a region of nearly 5 million people.

The full extent of the damage is still not yet clear. Even though the weather system was downgraded on Saturday morning from a cyclone to a tropical low, it is developing into one of the most impactful weather events to hit eastern Australia in decades.

One death has so far been recorded, a 61-year-old man who went missing on Friday afternoon and has since been identified as Tommy Cook. He was found dead on Saturday afternoon in northern NSW.

Flooding has hit major suburbs, cities and localities, including in Brisbane, Queensland's capital city. The regional city of Lismore in northern NSW is also affected, only three years after its people faced the devastation of the 2022 floods.

Major flood warnings remain in place for a number of rivers, including Laidley Creek in the Lockyer Valley, the Logan and Albert rivers in Logan, a working-class region in Brisbane's south, and the Tweed, Richmond and Clarence river valleys in NSW.

Heavy gusts of wind, up to 100 kilometres per hour have been observed across southern Queensland. Residents have had trees fall onto their roofs and damage their houses. More than 3,000 insurance claims have been filed for homes, with more expected in the coming week, but many others are not insured for floods.

There are also widespread phone service outages, including mobile phones and landlines. Many people have been cut off from communicating with family members, unable to find out how they are coping with the weather conditions.

The slow-moving nature of the weather system means that the danger for many areas is not over. A Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) spokesperson said that "intense

rainfall leading to dangerous and life-threatening flash flooding” was expected to continue for large areas of southern Queensland.

The western Brisbane city of Ipswich is likely to experience “major flooding” with river levels likely “rising further to around 12.35 [metres], in the overnight period Monday into Tuesday,” the spokesperson said.

Severe weather warnings are in place from the city of Gympie, north of Brisbane, to south of the Queensland-NSW border, a distance spanning at least 250 kilometres.

About 740 people in northern NSW had taken refuge across 21 evacuation centres by 10 a.m. Saturday, with 1,110 people registered to use them. About 20,000 people were subject to evacuation warnings in the region.

The Master Plumbers Association Queensland issued a media release warning that overflowing drains and sewer systems could leech dangerous pathogens into water. Floodwaters can also mix with industrial waste like fuel, pesticides and chemicals.

Despite the ongoing danger, Queensland Premier David Crisafulli of the Liberal National Party announced the reopening of more than half of the 1,049 schools in the state that were closed due to the wild weather. He said he was leaving it up to parents to decide whether it was safe to send their children to school.

Crisafulli justified the rush by claiming that they were the best ones to decide whether to try to travel to schools, despite the dangerous conditions facing students, families and school staff. At the same time, he emphasised the need to reopen businesses.

According to the *Australian*, Crisafulli “let rip” in a phone hook-up with mayors and emergency service bosses on Sunday, opposing an alert issued by a local council advising people to stay home. He said it could undercut the government’s efforts to prevail on essential employees to report for work. In the case of schools, his government wanted inspectors from state agency QBuild on duty to certify that they could reopen.

As in previous flood and bushfire disasters, the effects of ex-Cyclone Alfred are exposing serious government under-preparedness for such extreme weather events and a reliance on both volunteers and

the military in lieu of a prepared civilian task force.

The largely volunteer Queensland SES recorded its largest number of emergency calls in a 24-hour period over the weekend, responding to over 3,600 calls for help.

On Saturday afternoon, two Australian Defence Force personnel carriers crashed while driving on the road near Lismore, on their way to assist the NSW SES with a fallen tree. More than a dozen soldiers were injured.

Little information has been released about how this incident occurred, but it highlights the unsuitability of the military and its vehicles for disasters such as this. Initial reports indicate that as the first truck lost control on a wet and winding road, it rolled several times into a nearby paddock. The second truck swerved to avoid a collision.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and senior ministers flew to a Brisbane military base the next day to thank troops and identify themselves with the armed forces.

Concerned about potential unrest, Albanese, Crisafulli and NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns rushed to announce “hardship” payments of \$180 per person and \$900 per family. As with previous disasters, these amounts are completely inadequate for genuine disaster recovery for those impacted.

Albanese today said workers and business operators who have lost income can access up to 13 weeks of income support at the sub-poverty JobSeeker level of payment, which amounts to \$55 per day.

Once again, this disaster has raised basic political issues, such as lack of disaster preparation, inadequate infrastructure, housing development in flood-prone areas, reliance on volunteers and the military, and the underlying impact of climate change.



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