Review into fatal New Zealand landslide finds multiple warnings were ignored

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A damning review into the January 22, 2026 landslide disaster at Mount Maunganui in Tauranga, New Zealand, which killed six people at a council-owned campground, has confirmed that the tragedy was "preventable." For decades, repeated warnings that the site was unsafe were ignored.

The 268-page report, released on August 19, was prepared by retired High Court Judge Paul Davison KC for Tauranga City Council (TCC), which owns and operates the Beachside Holiday Park.

Just before 9:30 a.m. on January 22, following extremely heavy rainfall, a large section of the south-eastern slope of Mount Maunganui collapsed onto the campground, smashing into tents, caravans and an amenities building.

Those killed were Lisa Maclennan, 50, a literacy tutor at Morrinsville Intermediate School; friends Susan Knowles and Jacqualine Wheeler, both 71; Swedish tourist Måns Bernhardsson, 20; and 15-year-olds Sharon Maccanico and Max Furse-Kee, students at Pak?ranga College in Auckland.

The Davison report confirms what was clear soon after the landslide: the deaths were not simply due to an unavoidable natural disaster. On January 27, the WSWS noted that questions were already being "raised about why the campground was not evacuated despite several warnings well before the deadly landslide."

Davison's central conclusion is devastating: "This was not a hazard that was unknown, hidden, or beyond the reach of foresight. For more than two decades, one competent consultant after another identified the landslide hazard to the campground, located it on the very slope that failed," and warned of the potential consequences.

"As long ago as 1999, Dr Laurie Richards [a rock engineering consultant] warned that the siting of fragile holiday accommodation directly beneath these slopes was imprudent and that the risk to sleeping occupants was high. In 2006 [consulting firm] Avalon went further, estimating in plain numbers that a debris flow of the kind that had happened before would place some thirty people in its path and kill twenty-one."

A "Trigger Action Response Plan" (TARP), recommended by geotechnical consultants in 2023 and again in 2025, would have set out the conditions under which an urgent evacuation of the campsite should be ordered. The TARP was never implemented.

"The knowledge was there," Davison writes. "The means of reducing the risk of a landslide tragedy occurring was identified, available, and relatively inexpensive to implement."

The review condemned the fact that "No single person within the TCC organisation 'owned'" the risk. Successive restructures of the council dispersed institutional knowledge, while recommended safety measures "were scoped out or simply not actioned." The result was "a system that enabled an identified risk to life to remain unowned, un-escalated and unmanaged."

Davison concluded unequivocally that the tragedy was "preventable." He wrote: "Had a TARP been in place, evacuation would likely have occurred well prior to the fatal landslide and the tragic loss of life that occurred would in all likelihood have been averted."

On the day of the landslide, Maclennan, who was subsequently killed, woke other campers at about 5 a.m. after noticing instability on the hillside. She and her partner attempted to contact the campground's after-hours number, without success. Council staff arrived at the site shortly before 7:00 a.m. to inspect conditions, but no evacuation order was given.

Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) received a call from a local resident concerning an earlier landslide at 5:48 a.m. and informed the council. A camper also called the police around 6:30 a.m.

At 8:56 a.m., walking tracks on the mountain were closed by the council because of landslides. The campground remained occupied. More than half an hour later the deadly landslide struck.

Davison's review was commissioned by the TCC and its terms of reference excluded making any recommendations about "civil, criminal or disciplinary liability of any person."

TCC chief executive Marty Grenfell, who has been in the

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role for eight years, apologised on behalf of the council, telling the media: “We failed to manage the risks appropriately in relation to the campground. We need to address that.”

Speaking to Radio NZ (RNZ) on August 19, Grenfell said the reports warning about landslide risks “were never escalated to a point where anybody at a senior level within the organisation could provide guidance, direction, and ensure that they were appropriately managed.”

RNZ noted that TCC’s own website shows that a June 2025 geohazard report was included as an agenda item that August. RNZ reported that the meeting was “cancelled because of concerns about the number of councillors able to attend” and it is not clear why the meeting was not rescheduled.

Tauranga Mayor Mahé Drysdale rejected calls from local residents for Grenfell to resign. He offered apologies to the victims’ families and declared to the media: “Our organisation should have done better.”

The invocation of “systemic failure” is being used to obscure rather than establish individual and political responsibility. If everyone is supposedly part of a defective “system,” then no senior official is held responsible for ensuring that the system protects human life.

Investigations by police, the workplace health and safety regulator WorkSafe, the coroner and a separate government inquiry are ongoing. The National Party-led government, however, has given no indication that anyone will be held accountable.

Opposition Labour Party leader Chris Hipkins told the *New Zealand Herald* that the government and councils had to act “immediately” to prevent future disasters. “Too often, after disasters, we hear promises that lessons will be learned. The real test is whether governments and councils actually act on those lessons,” he said.

This is sheer hypocrisy. The previous Labour government, led by Prime Ministers Jacinda Ardern and Hipkins, shut down the underground investigation into the Pike River coal mine disaster, where 29 men were killed in explosions on November 19, 2010.

Ardern took office in 2017 promising families that the mine would be re-entered to recover evidence, in order to prosecute those responsible for the extremely dangerous conditions that led to the disaster. In 2021, the government aborted the investigation and sealed the mine. The cover-up has meant that company managers, as well as state regulators and union bureaucrats who knew about the conditions in the mine, have faced no accountability.

Bernie Monk, whose 23-year-old son Michael was killed at Pike River, condemned the official response to the Davison report. “Six more families are now living the exact same nightmare we have endured for sixteen years,” Monk said in a statement sent to the WSWS.

“The Davison report proves that the system is totally broken. For 25 years, authorities knew there was a severe risk to life at that campsite, and they did nothing. It is the exact same story as Pike River—slipping standards, ignored warnings, and zero accountability.”

In a letter to Workplace Relations Minister Brooke Van Velden, he also condemned the government’s moves to water down workplace safety regulations, saying: “History is repeating itself right before our eyes. Pike River happened because of slipping standards and a lack of oversight; Mount Maunganui happened for the exact same reason.

“New Zealand’s current workplace safety framework is completely toothless. Financial penalties under the Health and Safety at Work Act are simply absorbed as the cost of doing business.”

Monk called for corporate manslaughter legislation “with mandatory prison sentences when gross negligence leads to fatalities.”

The Mount Maunganui landslide is the latest in a series of preventable disasters in New Zealand, including Pike River; the collapse of the poorly-constructed CTV building in the February 2011 Christchurch earthquake, which killed 115 people; and the 2019 Whakaari/White Island eruption, which killed 22 people.

In each case, investigations revealed that warnings had been ignored and regulators had failed to take action. This is not simply a matter of bureaucratic incompetence or individual mistakes. Under capitalism, protection of human life is continuously subordinated to financial and corporate interests.

Councils throughout New Zealand operate along business lines, cutting costs, raising rates and charges and privatising public services and infrastructure. The TCC-owned Beachside Holiday Park generated significant revenue; the council’s 2020/2021 annual report boasted that it raised nearly $2.2 million that year. In 2023/2024, it recorded more than 83,300 guest nights. All the while, it operated beneath an unstable slope that experts had repeatedly identified as a potentially life-threatening hazard.

The central lesson workers must draw is that protection of human life cannot be entrusted to governments, businesses and councils whose decisions operate within a social system dominated by profit.

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