

# Death toll rises to 145 in New Zealand earthquake

By Tom Peters  
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The death toll from Tuesday's earthquake in Christchurch is continuing to rise, as the scale of the devastation in the city of 390,000 becomes more apparent. As of this morning, 145 people had been confirmed dead, while more than 200 remain unaccounted for—including 122 thought to have been crushed in the collapse of the Canterbury Television (CTV) building. Thousands of people have been injured.

About 600 search and rescue workers, including many teams from overseas, are continuing to recover bodies from the rubble in the city centre. Since Wednesday afternoon, no one has been rescued alive. Christchurch Mayor Bob Parker told the media that "entire blocks" of the CBD will need to be demolished. Early estimates put the cost of the earthquake between \$NZ10 and \$16 billion. Canterbury Chamber of Commerce CEO Peter Townsend told Radio New Zealand that the total cost, including last September's earthquake, could be as much as \$30 billion.

Tens of thousands of people have fled the city, which has been rocked by dozens of aftershocks over the past five days. So far, more than 340 houses in Christchurch and nearby Lyttelton have been declared unsafe, and residents in some suburbs have been evacuated. Following the destructive September 4 quake, 3,000 homes were declared uninhabitable. Officials say the figure is likely to be much higher this time.

More than 300 people are continuing to shelter in crowded welfare centres across the city. Yesterday, the Christchurch City Council was forced to close the Cowles Stadium welfare centre due to inadequate sanitation and concerns about a possible outbreak of measles or diarrhoea. Radio New Zealand reported that 180 people had slept at the stadium and more than 700 went there during the day seeking food, drinking water and other essential supplies.

Radio NZ's Bridget Mills said "there was a huge, huge demand for the assistance" from the Red Cross, with many desperate people having lost all their belongings. Hundreds of people were queuing for several hours to receive emergency payments and food vouchers from Work and Income New Zealand.

Ordinary people have already donated millions to help victims of the quake. Christchurch students have organised an army of 15,000 volunteers to help people in need and to clear thousands of tonnes of silt from residential areas.

The government's relief efforts, however, are completely inadequate. In a press statement yesterday Prime Minister John Key declared: "New Zealand stands shoulder to shoulder with you [Christchurch residents] ... and the government is behind you 100 percent of the way." In reality, the government has little concern for the vast majority of earthquake victims.

While New Zealand's corporate media has focused its attention almost entirely on the recovery efforts in the city centre, many in suburban Christchurch have spent days without receiving any outside help. Mayor Bob Parker confirmed this morning that just over 4,000 house calls had been made to inspect properties and check on residents—in a city with well over 100,000 houses.

The many thousands of people whose workplaces have been damaged in the earthquake—an estimated 50,000 are employed in Christchurch's CBD—have received no meaningful assistance. As of yesterday the government had provided emergency welfare grants to just 4,000 people for items such as food and clothing. Payments averaged a mere \$NZ170 (\$US127.5)—less than the current unemployment benefit of \$194.12 for a person over 25.

Many poor, disabled and elderly people, unable to leave the city or access welfare centres, have been neglected. The Labour Party's Brendon Burns, MP for Christchurch Central, told TVNZ yesterday that he had visited a partially flooded rest home in Avondale on Wednesday night. Staff at the home were struggling to care for "50 people, some with dementia" with no water or power supplies. Burns said he had "alerted health and engineering Council authorities [to the situation] but the word is that they cannot ... provide immediate responses even to that."

The *New Zealand Herald* reported yesterday that while some rest homes had been evacuated, others needed urgent assistance. All the aged care facilities it contacted on

Thursday “were struggling to cope without sewerage, collecting toilet waste in plastic bags. Many were also desperate for food and water.”

Perry Tainui, a mental health professional at Kakakura Health Services, told the *Australian* newspaper that “he had not been able to find all of his clients since the quake and was concerned that some of the city’s poorest people were being overlooked in the recovery.”

Commenting on the situation facing residents in the badly-damaged suburbs of New Brighton and Bexley, a *Nelson Mail* journalist wrote today: “It is here that the enormity of the situation comes home. These people have not seen yet anyone from the council or government, and the only contact they have with the outside world is through the radio, if they still have an old transistor around. They have no power and no water, except what is pooled in their streets. They are very much alone. When will this be fixed? Will it take days? Weeks? Months?”

This was echoed by Tony Hall, a resident of Eureka Street in working-class Aranui, a northern-eastern Christchurch suburb, who told the *Australian* that while power had been restored to more affluent areas such as Merivale, the mainly state-owned housing district had been “forgotten”. Eureka Street had been flooded with silt but its residents received no assistance. “It is like we don’t even exist,” Hall said.

Some 80 percent of Christchurch now has power, but half the city has no water supply and about 100,000 homes are without sewage. The Christchurch City Council has admitted that some areas may have to wait months for services to be restored.

The conservative National Party government has granted itself sweeping powers by imposing a nation-wide state of emergency. Its priority has been to maintain “law and order” and to prop up the interests of big business. It has poured hundreds of army personnel and police officers into Christchurch, including 324 police officers from Australia. Much of the central city remains cordoned off and the council has imposed a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew.

Since the destructive September 4 earthquake, hundreds of people, if not thousands, have been forced to live in severely damaged properties. Insurance companies and the state-owned insurer, the EQC (Earthquake Commission), have delayed making payments for repairs or alternative accommodation. On February 13 the *Sunday Star-Times* reported that residents of Seabreeze Close in Bexley were told they may have to wait five years before they could move into rebuilt homes on strengthened land.

Fletcher Construction, which had been managing repair of about 60,000 homes for the EQC, told the *New Zealand Herald* on February 5 that it had only “engaged” with the owners of about 1,000 properties.

The EQC received 181,702 claims for damages following the September 4 quake. Five months after that disaster, 102,872 or 56 percent of the claims had still not been assessed. On February 16 the *Press* reported that 64,809 claimants’ properties had not even been visited by the EQC. The government expects an additional 130,000 EQC claims from the 2011 disaster.

The government has quickly moved to consult business interests over their agenda. On Thursday, just two days after the quake, Key and finance minister Bill English held a conference call with the chief executives of Business New Zealand’s major companies group—representing most of New Zealand’s largest businesses. English reported that the government was pleased to receive the “constructive ideas” from the business leaders. The government will meet with Christchurch business representatives on Monday to discuss an assistance package. Canterbury Chamber of Commerce CEO Peter Townsend is calling for grants of \$20 million “for the first four weeks”, similar to those handed out after the September quake.

Meanwhile, the ruling elite is already discussing how best to impose the cost of the disaster on working people. Following the example of Australian Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who recently imposed a “levy” on ordinary taxpayers earning over \$50,000 to pay for damage caused by the recent floods, Key said his government would consider an additional income tax. This idea received enthusiastic backing from Green Party co-leader Russel Norman, who suggested taxing income between \$48,000 and \$70,000 by an extra 1 percent, and income above \$70,000 by 2 percent.

Various mouthpieces for big business have suggested that the government use the quake as an “opportunity” to intensify its austerity measures. *New Zealand Herald* columnist Fran O’Sullivan, for example, urged the government to “review” its tax cuts “and the extent of the interest-free student loans and Working for Families [welfare] tax credits”.

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