

East coast of Australia hit by catastrophic floods

By Oscar Grenfell
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Large swathes of northern New South Wales (NSW) and south-eastern Queensland have been hit by catastrophic floods in the aftermath of tropical Cyclone Debbie, which made landfall last Tuesday.

The flooding followed the transformation of the cyclone into an intense system of storm clouds, leading to massive rainfalls. Areas near Queensland's Gold Coast hinterland registered up to 900 millimetres of rain in 48 hours last week, well over the average annual rainfall in some of the country's major cities, such as Melbourne.

Five people have perished in the floods and at least three people are missing in Queensland, prompting fears that the death toll will continue to rise over the coming days. Thousands of homes have been inundated by floodwaters, with many rendered uninhabitable. Five areas in northern NSW were officially declared disaster zones on Friday.

Thousands of people are still unable to return to their homes and thousands more are without electricity and other essential services.

While waters have begun to recede in parts of northern NSW, the flood crisis is far from over. Rockhampton, a regional city in central Queensland with a population of around 80,000, is set to be hit today by its worst floods since 1954. At least 5,400 homes and businesses in low-lying areas are threatened with inundation.

The city of Lismore in northern NSW, and neighboring towns, including Murwillumbah and Chinderah, were among the worst affected when waters struck the area late last week, in the worst flood disaster since 1974.

Lismore residents have begun returning to the city and surveying the damage. Naomi Tarrant, from the Lismore Environment Centre told the ABC last night,

“It's a disaster zone, it really is. Just mud and debris and concerned people everywhere—people cleaning out their businesses... It's so inconceivable what's been lost down town here.”

Pictures posted online from Lismore show houses and businesses gutted by flood waters and front lawns strewn with damaged household objects.

Residents have told of harrowing experiences when Lismore's central business district (CBD) was completely submerged by floodwaters on Friday, after a number of suburbs had been engulfed over the previous days.

One man was rescued from the wall of a church as floodwaters swirled around him. Others sought refuge on the roofs of their homes. Some reported seeing people clinging to trees to survive. In Murwillumbah, 45 people were trapped in an art gallery on Thursday, and were not able to move to higher ground until Saturday.

A 36-year-old woman died in flood waters at a property 20 kilometres south of Murwillumbah. A 46-year old man died after his home, near the town, was flooded. A 47-year-old man was killed south of the town when his caravan was struck by flood waters. A 64-year-old woman perished on Thursday after her car was swept off a causeway at Gungahlin, in the Hunter Valley region.

In Queensland, a 77-year-old man died in the town of Eagleby after he was caught in rapidly rising waters on Friday.

Questions have emerged over the severity of the Lismore floods. The city centre was rapidly engulfed on Friday after floodwaters breached a flood levee. Constructed in 2005, the levee was designed to withstand only a one-in-ten-year flood, meaning that it was not built to cope floods of last week's magnitude.

Over the weekend, the NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian denounced people in the area who “did not follow instructions” to evacuate. She claimed that the seriousness of the floods was not anticipated because forecasts underestimated rainfalls.

A number of residents around Lismore, however, have said that they had little chance to escape the flood. Phillip Roberts, from Wyralla, a town near Lismore, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “They tell everyone in the towns what’s going on but further downstream, you’re sort of in the dark until that knock on the door from police. We got told, ‘This is a 100-year flood, you need to go.’ But we had nowhere to go.”

There are also fears that a number of the city’s small businesses will be forced to close. Many face the prospect of weeks without trading. Numbers of businesses and homes in the city were not insured as a result of exorbitant premiums, with some insurers reportedly charging up to \$50,000 a year for businesses in the flood-prone CBD.

In Queensland, clean-up efforts are still underway after Cyclone Debbie hit last week. At least 270 houses on the south-east coast have been rendered uninhabitable while another 1,000 have undergone damage assessments.

Tourists and residents in some of the worst affected areas have complained of being virtually abandoned by government authorities. Last Thursday, several days after the disaster, people in the Whitsunday’s region were being told not to drink tap water.

Food shortages have also been reported, with one woman telling the *Townsville Bulletin* that she had nothing to eat but tins of baked beans and bread after the unit she was staying at on Hamilton Island lost its roof during the cyclone.

She said that residents were at the mercy of travel agents and shops charging exorbitant prices for basic necessities. “We’ve had no one tell us about food or water, we only know the store is selling stuff which we cannot buy as they’re only accepting cash payment but there’s no way to get money out,” she commented.

Anger has also emerged over claims that not enough water was released from Kinchant Dam, 30 kilometres west of Mackay in eastern Queensland, prior to Cyclone Debbie. The dam was reportedly at 98 percent capacity before the cyclone struck.

Residents of Eton, a town south of Mackay, say that

their homes were inundated on Wednesday, after water was released from the dam. They received virtually no warning and were trapped without power or phone coverage.

As in previous disasters, the government response to the cyclone and its aftermath has been manifestly inadequate. Queensland residents who have lost everything are eligible for immediate hardship relief of just \$180 per person. Queensland Labor Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk has called for volunteers to clean up the aftermath of the cyclone and flood, in effect demanding that ordinary people fill the breach left by insufficient government preparation and disaster resources.

In 2011, floods in Queensland killed 35 people and inundated 29,000 homes and businesses. The disaster revealed that emergency services were unequipped and unprepared to respond to a crisis of that magnitude and that virtually no flood mitigation measures had been put in place. Six years on, the initial indications are that successive Labor and Liberal-National governments have done little or nothing to rectify the situation.

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