

Australia: Renewed flooding again imperils thousands of people

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Only four weeks after record-breaking floods in Australia devastated cities and towns in New South Wales and Queensland, areas of northern NSW are again being severely impacted by torrential rains and flash flooding.

Just as quickly, the renewed emergency has exposed the lack of government assistance, resources and basic infrastructure—even rain gauges, pumps and warning signals—that has now twice thrown thousands of residents into danger in low-lying areas.

People who were just starting to recover, and partly restore homes where possible, have again been inundated, causing further hardship and distress, as well as anger over the inadequate and indifferent official response.

Communities throughout northern NSW have experienced as much as 200-300mm of rainfall in just a few hours, leading to destructive and sometimes unprecedented rapid flooding. Alstonville, a town between Ballina and Lismore, received 431mm in 24 hours.

Ballina experienced just short of a metre of rain in one week, with around half that amount falling in 24 hours. Similarly heavy rain was recorded in Byron Bay, Coffs Harbour, Dorrigo and Bellingen.

So far, about 20 evacuation orders are in place across the Northern Rivers region of NSW, affecting around 28,000 people. The largely-volunteer State Emergency Service (SES) carried out 55 flood rescues in 24 hours. Searches are continuing for a missing aged care worker, feared drowned in her car.

In the regional city of Lismore, one of the worst-hit areas of the previous floods, there was again widespread fury over the response of governments and authorities as the town's levee was overtopped by floodwaters from the Wilsons River for the second time

within a month. The river's level peaked at over 11 metres last night, engulfing the central lower parts of the city.

Nearby towns, including Casino, Coraki, Evans Head, Yamba and Bungawalbin, were also inundated. The central business district of Byron Bay was submerged in what long-time residents described as some of the worst flooding they had experienced in half a century. At least three metres of water have been recorded in the area during the past 24 hours, overloading the town's drainage system and damaging dozens of shops.

The flooding also occurred in parts of southern Queensland, with 170 road closures reported to date. In the Gold Coast, 300mm of rain fell on the city in 24 hours to early Tuesday morning, while in Dalby, west of Brisbane, 2,000 homes were damaged by floodwaters after the Myall Creek peaked just under the record level from the 2011 floods.

Despite continuous severe storm warnings from the Australian Bureau of Meteorology, evacuation orders issued on Monday by the NSW SES for thousands of residents in northern parts of the state were rescinded on Tuesday afternoon, only to be reimposed in the early hours of Wednesday morning due to an overnight spike in rainfall, much to the anger and bewilderment of residents.

Furthermore, because of faulty communications systems, the SES had to use Facebook to alert people to evacuate, and some were not told directly to leave their homes until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, giving them only a couple of hours to collect their possessions and flee.

The chaotic emergency response was also hampered in Lismore by the failure of the town's flood evacuation sirens, pumps and rain gauges, which had not been repaired or replaced since being put out of action by the February 28 flood disaster.

Ballina residents also said they were never notified in advance as to when flooding would occur and many were then cut off from evacuation centres. Even by early Wednesday, neither Ballina nor Byron Bay had received evacuation orders or warnings from the SES.

Yet the acting NSW premier Paul Toole defiantly defended the state government's performance when it was criticised at a press conference on Wednesday. "When you have a look at the rainfall, no one could have predicted some of the amounts we have seen," he insisted. "Four weeks ago, these communities were impacted... no one could have predicted that we would be back here again."

In Lismore, the trauma was intensified by the piles of debris still sitting outside homes and businesses from the February 28 catastrophe, not yet collected. People who had camped inside their ruined houses were forced to hurriedly evacuate again.

This time, the flood levels were somewhat lower, so mass rescues by volunteers were not needed, but bitter memories remain about the way in which thousands of people had to be saved by fellow residents on February 28, unable to even contact emergency services.

An evacuated Lismore resident spoke to the WSWs yesterday from nearby Alstonville. Some people who lost their homes on February 28, and who were eventually allocated small government-supplied camper vans, were shifted there as the floodwaters rose again.

"The rain was so bad last night," she said. "It was so relentless. It went on for hours and hours with a double lightning strike and triple thunderclap at one point uprooting a tree and people were starting to get anxious.

"We were taken to a site on the [Alstonville] Showground where we each had to stay in a van, with the government paying \$375 a night for us to stay in those vans. There were about 40–60 vans on the site for one person each, although some allowed for two. You had to walk for a mile in the rain to access toilets and showers, which some people had to drive in their cars to get to. We also get food donations, but it's pretty much all we have."

Even before this week's floods, the previous ones had devastated the lives of thousands of households in northern NSW, with the SES estimating that 3,600 homes in Lismore, Murwillumbah, Ballina and Coraki were uninhabitable, with some being condemned to

demolition because of extensive flood damage.



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