



NORTHERN  
LAND COUNCIL

**MEDIA RELEASE**

*Our Land, Our Sea, Our Life*

## **Borrooloola residents recount horror, as the Aboriginal community becomes the latest to suffer inadequate emergency response**

26 March 2024

**The Northern Land Council (NLC) met with Borrooloola flood evacuees in Darwin on the weekend and joins with them in urging Federal and Northern Territory governments to address poor emergency communications, evacuation processes, and future preparedness.**

Severe flooding in the Aboriginal community of Borrooloola, 970-kilometres south-west of Darwin, has again revealed the inadequacy of emergency response measures.

On Saturday, the NLC Chair Matthew Ryan met with evacuated Borrooloola residents who are receiving emergency accommodation at the Darwin showgrounds. The community members shared their distress about how the situation unfolded and provided insights into how the response can, and must, be improved ahead of any future emergencies. Their outlook, [aligned with climate science](#), is that these weather events will not just be "[once-in-100-year](#)" occurrences.

On the Friday, March 15, the NLC was already fielding alarmed calls from Borrooloola residents, who were being severely impacted by pre-cyclone flooding. People were having difficulties reaching emergency services, including being redirected to interstate call centres, which were unaware of Borrooloola's location. Mr Ryan immediately reached out to government officials to highlight the communication challenges and urge that they initiate an adequate response.

When Tropical Cyclone Megan tore through the region on Monday afternoon, the town's 700 residents were forced to bunker down because evacuation flights had been unable to land. The Northern Territory Chief Minister's directive was to instead find room inside the local police station, health centre, and some homes that were cyclone graded.

Several residents to whom the NLC spoke are critical that evacuations should have taken place much earlier, and that the instructions they received were unclear, leading many to leave their homes, be exposed to the dangerous weather, and in cases even become stranded in unsuitable shelters.

The heavy rains that followed the category-3 cyclone saw the McArthur River predicted to reach 18 metres on Thursday evening, surpassing the previous record set in 2001 by three metres. The Australian Defence Force responded by airlifting 380 residents to Darwin on Wednesday and Thursday.

The Bureau of Meteorology subsequently announced that while there were no recent river level observations available at Borrooloola, flood waters are likely to recede over the coming days. Yet the Borrooloola residents remain split between Darwin and their home, where they had been already working to repair damage caused by Cyclone Lincoln last month.

## POOR COMMUNICATION

The chief concern among Borrooloola residents has been a severe lack of communication, from the early moments when the emergency was first forecasted, through to its critical stages.

At the NLC's Full Council meeting on March 12, the first concern put to Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was by members from the Borrooloola/Barkly region. They stressed that telecommunications blackholes and outages have long rendered their community highly vulnerable.

At that meeting, inadequate emergency response was specifically identified as a key issue across all seven of the NLC regions. Victoria River District Council Members shared harrowing photographs from severe flooding they had encountered and highlighted [the grossly inadequate response in Nitjpurru](#) (Pidgeon Hole), which has been evacuated twice this Wet Season.

In Borrooloola, residents had relied on the limited NT Police personnel on the ground to provide face-to-face directions, because electricity was down, and unreliable telecommunications reception meant people could not consistently receive messages nor online alerts.

There was also a reported a lack of clarity and contradictions when messages did get through. Several official emergency notices [posted to Facebook](#) diverted people seeking information to as many as eight different numbers or websites. Future updates that were promised to be posted at specific times did not eventuate, adding to the confusion and further diminishing trust.

## EVACUATION HORROR

Borrooloola residents were told they would be evacuated on an elderly-and-vulnerable-first basis, however people to whom the NLC spoke stressed that this didn't appear to happen. They also raised concerns of families being split, including dependent individuals being separated from their care providers or those that could carry essentials such as warm blankets.

Residents shared being herded without clarity and left waiting in the pouring rain and cold, with one man having a seizure. When attempting to board the Australian Defence Force aircraft to get

out of the wild weather, they recalled being unnecessarily stopped and asked to produce personal identification.

There were further concerns raised about the disrespectful attitudes of responders. What was relayed was a time of high vulnerability and personal anguish. Residents were only able to bring one bag, and had to leave behind family members and pets, with some even being unsure of their whereabouts or safety.

Those that could not be evacuated found refuge in damaged buildings, without electricity nor food supplies, as wind and rain streamed in.

#### WAY FORWARD

Residents at the Darwin showgrounds emergency accommodation are unsure of what will come next. Some people have left to stay with family or sought to purchase accommodation. There are levels of discomfort with the overcrowding, open-plan nature of the facility, and refusals to permit relatives to visit to provide support.

Despite this, countless community members praised the staff for the care they have shown. Across community there is also a strong desire to come together and find a better way forward, to prevent so much distress from occurring again.

The NLC will be supporting Borroloola residents to host a full community meeting when they are able to return. The Council backs calls for government and emergency services representatives to attend and to plan collaborations on infrastructure and telecommunications repair efforts, as well as future emergency response processes and the construction of appropriate facilities, including a cyclone shelter.

Meanwhile, Nitjpurru (Pidgeon Hole) residents are today preparing for a third flood since January, including using local machinery to create a makeshift shelter as current facilities cannot accommodate all members of the community. The residents and the NLC urge the governments to be proactive and provide assistance immediately.

The NLC acknowledges that its Council members are trusted leaders in communities who can further support NT Police in updating people throughout emergency situations, but only if they are better utilised and kept informed. The Council also has locally based staff and assets, such as vehicles and boats. These could be mobilised in times of emergency if proactive planning and agreements can be reached, for which the NLC has been lobbying the government since February 2023.

**Quotes attributable to Mr Matthew Ryan, Chair of the NLC:**

- *We acknowledge that the staff of the Roper Gulf Regional Council did their best to support the community, but the Federal and NT governments' emergency response support has been appalling. Nitjpurru, Kalkarindji, now Borrooloola... lessons are not being learned and as a result our communities continue to suffer.*
- *The governments must work together with the communities and the Land Councils to address the key issues. The big one is communication in times of emergency. Evacuee accommodation also needs to be more culturally appropriate, and better processes as well as proper cyclone shelters must be prepared for the future. We cannot wait for the next emergency to happen and have the same problems over and over again.*
- *Floods are becoming more frequent, but we must not lose sight of how horrific each and every one is for our people caught up in them.*
- *Imagine being out there stranded, surrounded by rising water, not getting any clear direction, and seeing planes circle but then just leave? Or if you can be evacuated, your life is in just one bag, there's uncertainty of where you'll stay, if you can see your family, and if anything will be left when you are able to return home?*

**Quotes attributable to Borrooloola residents evacuated to the Darwin Showgrounds:**

**Mr Elton Daniels, Borrooloola resident**

- *When they got us to move up to the Roper Gulf to evacuate us, they gave us tags and made us sign our name and address in the rain. And then they cancelled the plane. They should have done it all a day or two earlier when we didn't have so much rain. They were mucking us around.*
- *Even my father-in-law he took a fit sitting there waiting in the rain and wind.*

**Mrs Diane Norman, Borrooloola resident**

- *We came at 7am o'clock [on Monday] like they said. In the wind and rain, we old people had to stand there while we were waiting for the plane. But it didn't land. It was very difficult.*
- *We were hungry, we only had only apples. Waiting there [on Monday] until 4pm. They didn't come until Wednesday.*
- *My brother Vincent Charlie had a fit waiting for the bus through that rain and wind. Having all those old people stand like that, it was very sad.*
- *You had to bring one bag, no blanket. And when we get up to the plane they said we gotta get the ID, but we are standing there in the rain. People were opening their bags to look around for the ID, and then they were searching bags. All getting wet.*
- *We don't know how long we are here [in Darwin] for, they don't tell us. We will wait for the water. Some of the people saw that they lost their houses. Completely gone.*

**Mr Benjamin McDinny, Borroloola resident**

- *People were in that [shire council] shed with all the wind. The planes couldn't land [on Monday], they circle around several times, but couldn't. People were just there waiting, waiting, old people too, in the pouring rain.*
- *There are more people still back at Borroloola now, we don't know what it's like there. I heard some people stayed inside the school, they are probably still there. It has been four or five days with no telecommunications working.*
- *I would like to see some tower, and better communications. We need to be able to have regular contact if something like that happens again so we can reach our families. My eldest daughter she is there, and I have tried to get in contact with her but I just can't.*
- *It needs to be done better, to get more organised. We need the communications up for the next one. We had a big cyclone in 1984, same problems again. The whole community will get together and raise different ideas to these issues.*

**Mrs Iris Hogan, Borroloola resident**

- *They came and said to me 7am at the airport, it was in the wet and cold. I had a kid on either side of me trying to sleep all wet and shaking. We were there all day until then they told us to go home, not to go shelter here or there. When I went back to my house it was damaged.*
- *Next day I had to take myself down to the edge of the water. I asked the police why were all these young people were going across in the boat, not the sick and older ones that should go first. They said the community should have gone and got me. But the police could have used their siren again to tell us there was a boat down there. Then they said to wait for the SES, or you can jump on the bus, but the kids have to stay. I said who is going to look after me? I'm not going on the bus, I'm staying with my kids – we are going to die together then!*
- *For three nights I was sleeping with no power...there was eight of us sleeping in that room, hungry because no shops open.*
- *My granddaughter and this other girl, they were carrying me on [to the plane] and I was shaking, my bones, it was just terrible. I cried in the plane.*
- *The Borroloola police were so rude and racist. They were shouting, barking, at me to get on a bus. I'm an old lady, you don't shout at me. When the army mob pulled up, they helped us and asked if we were alright. It is also better here [at the emergency accommodation in Darwin], all these people of different cultures. They are kind.*

**Mr Simyon Pluto – Borroloola resident**

- *[On Monday] before they drove everyone up to the airport from the council offices there, everyone had to get a tag so that they know you're from Borroloola, there were only four people trying to do that, how are they going to manage to get through 700 people?*
- *They drove the old people from the council shed to the airport and they sat there in the bus for around eight hours. They were hungry, asking for food. There was no support from the*

*local town shops or the council for food supplies, just apples. When the police came around the night before they told us just one bag and no food, you'll go straight to the airport and onto the plane; that didn't happen.*

- *I blasted the police and ADF mob, there should have been local police working with us straight away. They knew what was going to happen, I said to all the families, we all got to stand up and help each other, we are from this community.*
- *Then on Tuesday, we had the sun out all day; they should have had the evacuation that morning. The word came around that they would try to evacuate tomorrow [Wednesday], and we said, what? There will be another big rain coming down.*
- *Wednesday, old people were waiting at the airport gate, rain pouring down, no shelter there. You think they would have had portable tents, but nothing. Old people had a rag over their head standing up.*
- *Last time we had an emergency like this the old [police] sergeant was good, she organised people to get their cars, fuel, permits if they weren't registered, and to drive to Katherine early, where they'd be safe. Community had a good relationship with those coppers. Now they stopped being community[-minded] police.*
- *By the time I got here [to Darwin] and I got in contact with my son [back in Borroloola], he said we've been using the boat to get people across, we are here for our people. There were some arguments with the white people about whether they could be using that boat. My son said look this is our community, I am going to help them.*

**Mr Dickie Dixon – Robinson River resident**

- *What happens to us? We get our food through the road there.*
- *The impacts from this, and how the governments respond affect many, many people in the region.*
- *Canberra don't know community, they aren't there. We are trying our best, with many of our people having skills to help, like the Rangers. We stand up for ourselves, but why aren't they [the police and SES] helping before it gets so bad?*
- *There was financial support, these temporary cards for the people who were evacuated to Darwin, but what is the support for the people that couldn't be evacuated? It needs to be fair.*