

SENATE LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL LEGISLATION COMMITTEE
ATTORNEY-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

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Question No. 73

Senator Ludwig asked the following question at the hearing on 24 May 2006:

Cyclone Larry: Please provide the Committee a copy of the debrief report, when it is finalised.

The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:

The report 'Australian Government lessons learnt from Tropical Cyclone Larry' is attached.

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT LESSONS LEARNT FROM TROPICAL CYCLONE LARRY

Introduction

Severe Tropical Cyclone Larry crossed the tropical north Queensland coast near Innisfail during the morning of 20 March, 2006. The eye of TC Larry crossed the coast near Innisfail between 6:20am and 7:20am on 20 March, 2006 with the intensity of a Category 5 cyclone. After crossing the coast, TC Larry maintained cyclone strength for several hundred kilometres inland until the early hours of 21 March 2006.

Tropical Cyclone Larry caused major damage to homes and other buildings as well as extensive damage to local crops, along the portion of coast between Cairns in the north and Cardwell in the south. Townships affected by the northern and southern portions of the eyewall of the cyclone received the most damage, particularly Babinda and Silkwood, however all townships in the region were severely affected by the cyclone. (This information has been obtained from the Bureau of Meteorology website - http://www.bom.gov.au/weather/qld/cyclone/tc_larry/)

Under the Australian Government Disaster Response Plan (COMDISPLAN), Emergency Management Australia (EMA) coordinated the Australian Government response to requests from the Queensland Government for assistance.

Immediately following TC Larry making landfall and reports of the initial assessment of damage received, Director General EMA (DGEMA) convened an Australian Government Counter Disaster Task Force (AGCDTF) meeting, at 1130 hours 20 March 2006. Australian Government departments and agencies represented on this AGCDTF included Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Australian Defence Force (ADF), Bureau of Meteorology, Coastwatch, Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA), Department of Health and Aging, Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FACSIA), Centrelink, AusAID, Department of Transport and Regional Services and the Department of Finance and Administration.

In addition to the AGCDTF, an Australian Government Disaster Recovery Committee (AGDRC) was convened to oversight Australian government's involvement in the longer term recovery efforts. This Committee was managed by FACSIA and had representation from a wide range of Australian Government departments and agencies, including EMA.

By 30 March 2006 (10 days after TC Larry crossed the Queensland coast), 37 requests for assistance from the Queensland Government had been activated. Also, DGEMA had chaired 16 meetings of the AGCDTF and provided regular briefings to the Attorney-General.

The National Emergency Management Coordination Centre (NEMCC) at EMA coordinated the delivery of a large number of services and assets, including food and water, tarpaulins, ADF personnel and resources, showers and sanitation facilities, generators, communications equipment, satellite imagery and milking machines to assist in the response and recovery effort from TC Larry.

A total of 20 EMA staff were involved in maintaining 24 hour operations and/or extended hours for the NEMCC, acting as Emergency Management Liaison Officers in Brisbane and Cairns and participating in multi-agency coordination meetings.

The following are “lessons learnt” from the Australian Government perspective on the TC Larry response. The lessons have been compiled from information provided during a post TC Larry debriefing session of the AGCDTF on Wednesday, 26 April 2006.

Liaison Officers

Early engagement of relevant agencies resulted in early deployment of EMA liaison officers to Queensland and to the disaster store in Moorebank. In addition, the early deployment of Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQ JOC Defence) liaison officers in the NEMCC also assisted the response effort.

While situating an ADF liaison officer at the command centre (NEMCC) was good, it was felt that sometimes the best place for liaison officers was in their own operation centre where resources are at hand. However, this would require liaison officers to be fully engaged with the incident and provided with the most up to date information.

Interagency teamwork and coordination

The AGCDTF and AGDRC were convened for the TC Larry response. Clear links between AGCDTF and the AGDRC with cross links and coordination through EMA assisted the response effort.

The good teamwork in the AGCDTF also assisted in agencies coming together and worked well. In such an event, response and recovery merge early to allow early start on the recovery process, via the AGDRC.

In terms of logistics, the timing of AGCDTF teleconferences needed to be considered as this was a very busy period for the Queensland response agencies.

GIS and Damage Assessment Issues

Damage assessment is critical in any event. However, in doing any immediate impact assessment, factors such as weather conditions can affect the survey process. Where possible, both on the ground assessment and early aerial evaluation are necessary.

In addition, there is a need to consider alternate sources of information to ensure validity of the total damage assessment. For example, the public information that was generally available indicated that the outlying islands were lightly impacted by TC Larry. However, the Bureau of Meteorology was advised that several tourist islands in outlying regions were heavily damaged which implied a mismatch of damage assessment information between agencies.

Event specific issues

AMSA’s tasking and involvement in the TC Larry response was quick and efficient. The local authority directly tasked the aircraft and this worked very well for the rapid outcomes that were achieved.

Air Services Australia (ASA) situating of a fire truck and an ASA command vehicle at Innisfail airport early in the event helped the response effort.

The staged activities of COMDISPLAN activation worked well (i.e. from White to Yellow to Red and then back to Green). The Plan activation provided AMSA and other agencies involved in the response effort with the authority to commit resources at the relevant stages. In effect, COMDISPLAN activation focused executives' attention and added urgency to tasks. Lesson learnt here is that tasking must be provided with authority.

Australian Government and State Government coordination

During the TC Larry response, the identification of the declared 'disaster area' by the Queensland Government needed to be clearly defined as it affected FACSIA's and DOTARS's work in determining grants/handouts eligibility and affected the authority to process payments to affected communities.

Defence issues

Defence stated that when requesting assistance for any event, it would assist efforts if requests also specify desired outcomes rather than just simple requests for assets. Often, there may be other means of achieving the desired outcomes. DACC Guidelines address appropriate procedures for requesting assistance.

Media Issues

The issue of accuracy of information released through the media is also a lesson learnt from this event. For example, in the TC Larry response, a public announcement was made that the Army would clean up farms and rivers affected by the cyclone. This information was in fact wrong and subsequently caused disruptions to the response efforts until corrected.

Australian Government talking points should be provided to all Ministers' staff through **one** source. Consequently, there must be good information flow back to the coordinating Australian Government agencies and Ministers which includes input from the AGDRC.

Other guidelines For Australian Government Response

Audit Trail

There needs to be a full audit trail of decision making/authority/ actioning requests for assistance in the event of any future analysis of response. This includes COMDISPLAN task request templates to formalise processing of task requests. A rigorous, well documented process is needed for any post-event inquiry.

Response personnel qualifications

In any response effort, there will remain the issue of deploying qualified people from one state to another and ensuring they have approval to practice in the affected state. As a way forward, the issue of transportability of qualifications (especially medical and associated fields) in an event that involves response personnel from multi-jurisdictions will be considered by the Australian Emergency Management Committee (AEMC) and the Australian Health Protection Committee (AHPC).

Physical Assets and Resources used in Response

The use of commercial resources should also be considered in future response events, in line with COMDISPLAN requirements.

Information Management

Effective and timely communication will always be essential to the success of the response effort. In the TC Larry response, communications within Australian Government agencies and between the Australian and Queensland government was timely and reliable. However, there were logistical difficulties in providing public information to the community in the disaster area due to damage to infrastructure.

Conclusion

Overall, the response provided by the Australian Government to TC Larry was effective and timely. The lessons learnt from the Australian Government response to TC Larry will be important for other disaster events requiring Australian Government coordination and assistance to jurisdictions. Other issues like transportability of qualifications in a multiple jurisdiction event that require national cooperation will be considered by the AEMC and AHPC. In addition, the lessons will be considered in the next regular review of COMDISPLAN to ensure its comprehensiveness in dealing with such events in future.