



Speech by

Hon. PETER BEATTIE

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

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MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Cyclone Larry, Operation Recovery Task Force

Hon. PD BEATTIE (Brisbane Central—ALP) (Premier) (9.34 am): I want to report to the House this morning on yesterday's task force meeting. Yesterday afternoon the Operation Recovery Task Force met for the first time in the Johnstone Shire Council chambers, and the mayor was present. General Cosgrove, Sandy Hollway, Terry Mackenroth, Ross Rolfe and I met to discuss the short- and long-term priorities for the task force which has been charged with getting the communities devastated by the cyclone back on their feet.

It will not surprise anyone to hear that the priorities for Operation Recovery are housing, community welfare, business recovery and retention of people in the local community. On the final point, let me say that the task force and the government are working as closely as they possibly can on a number of these issues, and we are acutely aware of the importance of working to keep people traditionally employed in the agricultural sector in the area in preparation for the time when farmers can again harvest their crops.

I understand that the local federal member, Bob Katter, has this morning been claiming there has been an exodus of people, including schoolteachers. I want to highlight that this is not correct. The fact of the matter is that a commitment has been given to principals and teachers at a meeting in Innisfail last Friday by the Director-General of Education Queensland that staff numbers will be maintained at current levels even if enrolments fall. All schools in the cyclone affected area have reopened today. This is an extraordinary effort and it comes less than nine days after all 156 schools in the region were closed. It says a great deal about Education Queensland, a great deal about Q-Build and a great deal about this community. It also shows the level of commitment demonstrated by teachers and I want to thank every one of them.

Attendance at a majority of schools in the cyclone affected area is already around the 70 per cent to 80 per cent mark. I ask Mr Katter to moderate his comments. If he hears of problems in the local community, the proper thing to do is to report them to General Cosgrove. The people of the area deserve better than comments that can undermine public confidence. I want to make the point that Bob Katter rang me yesterday about assistance to various people, and I will follow those matters up with the Prime Minister. I have had a number of discussions with the Prime Minister. He has provided relief in terms of the excise paid on diesel or petrol fuel used by businesses including farmers and households that are generating their own electricity until normal services are restored. Therefore the excise of 35c or 36c will not be charged to people who are using generators to rebuild their lives.

I have talked to the Prime Minister about a number of packages relating to the farming sector, and at some point I am hopeful that he and I will have further discussions about that. I can also report that the task force has decided to appoint an expert insurance adviser to ensure the very best possible cooperation between the task force and the private sector—and the insurance industry in particular. The State Disaster Management Group has been tasked by Operation Recovery to provide counselling services to assist people who are traumatised because of the violence of Cyclone Larry and those who are finding it difficult to cope with the devastation the cyclone left in its aftermath.

The Department of Communities says that in the past week 1,516 people have been referred to counselling services. Those services are being provided through a coalition that comprises Lifeline, Centacare, Centrelink and Queensland Health's community mental health services. Today I appeal directly to people who are suffering: don't be embarrassed; put up your hand and ask for help. Everyone understands that the tragedy of your situation is very immense. There is help available which is professional and your privacy will be maintained. One of the things that Sandy Hollway said at yesterday's task force meeting—and I am sure he will not mind me saying this publicly—is that after the bushfires in the Australian Capital Territory, and based on what he understands to be the position, in two to three months we will have a lot of people in this community going through psychological trauma. The last thing we want is people driven to extreme positions—perhaps even suicide—because of what has happened to them. What I am trying to do today is reach out to all affected people on behalf of these services and suggest to them that they get help. We do not want people going through any more trauma than they have already been through. The problem is, as I indicated, that in two to three months we will get people suffering psychological trauma. We need to help them now. I urge them to come forward. We will give them whatever counselling or assistance they need.

The State Disaster Management Group will also be reporting to Operation Recovery on the number of uninsured properties and provide information on the details of the affected families and individuals. We know that this is going to be a major problem. The recovery task force is now exploring housing options including short-term housing options in the local area, as well as dealing with the uninsured and underinsured.

The task force has also agreed in principle to the establishment of a local Operation Recovery coordination group with representation from key agencies. This will ensure that local issues will be solved in cooperation with the local communities. We are determined that the communities affected will have a loud voice in the recovery process, and this decision by the task force will ensure that occurs. Operation Recovery will meet again next Thursday, 6 April, but of course the general and his team are continuing to work around the clock to ensure that the recovery and rebuilding effort is coordinated and efficient.

The effort to raise funds for the victims of this disaster is also continuing apace. Big business and the Commonwealth and Queensland governments have made major contributions to the Cyclone Larry disaster relief appeal along with many ordinary Australians. It now stands at \$9 million. We need a lot more than that. We will ensure that that money gets directly to the people, but we do need more than that. We need somewhere near double that to make a significant difference to many of the families who have lost everything.

As part of the effort to raise as much money as possible, my department has been approached to support a major concert to be held in Queensland in the coming weeks. I look forward to announcing the date and the line-up of acts in the coming days. However, I can confirm that the concert, at which we hope to feature international and national acts, will be held at Suncorp Stadium on a date to be fixed, but most likely late April or early May.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the many individuals and organisations who have approached us offering their assistance with fundraising concerts and shows. A lot of people have made offers. We will take these offers on board and try to coordinate them. We want this to be a major event which raises an enormous amount of money. That is why we have decided to use Suncorp Stadium for it. We need to get national and international acts.

In particular I want to thank Channel 9, which approached my department early on Tuesday, 21 March offering its services to telecast the proposed concert. We have been working on this for some time. We will continue to work with Channel 9 and an international promoter to ensure that we have a major concert or even a series of concerts to drive millions of dollars into the pockets of needy far-north Queensland families. A lot of work has been done on that. Musicians and others wanting to be involved should email cyclonerelief@premiers.qld.gov.au.

I am also hopeful that we will be able to organise a concert in the affected areas. I will continue to work with Operation Recovery to make this happen, if possible. I have discussed this with General Cosgrove. In the meantime, I would urge everyone who can spare even a few dollars to call 1800150411 to help make a difference and improve the lives of these people.