

**POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 13 FEBRUARY
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

PM: Kia ora, good afternoon, everybody. I'll start with the latest on Cyclone Gabrielle. The MetService continues to advise that things are likely to get worse before they get better, with more rain and severe winds forecast. Our advice remains unchanged: be prepared, stay inside if you can, and have a plan in the event that you need to move. We're seeing the impact of the cyclone across the top of the North Island.

As at 1.30 today, around 46,000 customers have lost their power. The bulk of these, around 24,000, are in Northland. Civil defence centres and shelters have been set up across the top of the North Island, and they are ready to use in the event that people have to evacuate.

For Northland, Auckland, the Coromandel, and the Bay of Plenty, the start of the year has been incredibly challenging. Extreme weather event has come on the back of extreme weather event. For families and businesses, I know that that has been just exhausting, and I want to acknowledge how hard many of them are doing it.

I also want to express my immense gratitude on behalf of all New Zealanders to our first responders and our emergency service workers, many of whom have hardly had a break this year. So our local and national emergency management and civil defence staff, police and fire, and ambulance workers, the New Zealand Defence Force, Whānau Ora providers, our social support agencies, and the teams of volunteers and countless others—too numerous to mention—who have been out at all hours of the day and night to keep people safe over the last few weeks, and especially in the last few days as we prepared for the cyclone, from the bottom of all of our hearts, we say thank you to you.

Many people just haven't been able to catch a break. The need in the community is significant, and the effect of the repeated weather events has compounded that. Our social service agencies are stretched to capacity. So today, I'm announcing a package of support for community social services in Auckland and other affected regions in the upper North Island to help ease some of that pressure so that they can continue with the task of supporting those most affected by the flooding and by the cyclone. Nearly 25,000 people have so far been assisted with food, clothing, shelter, bedding, and accommodation. People have lost their homes and their vehicles, families are facing additional challenges getting children back to school, and many families will be facing anxiety and distress from the significant disruption they've experienced.

It's clear that demand for support is exceeding the funding available to the groups providing it. Today's \$11.5 million package of measures will provide a significant boost to that, with additional funding for community groups to aid the thousands of families that are most in need. Up to \$4 million of funding will go to community providers so that they can continue to provide support to affected communities and whānau. Up to \$1 million is being provided through a food fund to reset the food stock levels amongst community food providers including food banks. Up to \$2 million will go to community groups affected by recent floods, and we're also expanding the scope of the community connectors and the discretionary support for flood-affected households with an additional \$4 million in funding. Half a million dollars will be ring-fenced to address the welfare needs of the disability community. This comes on top of the direct financial support the Government's already provided for businesses, the \$1.1 million for the Auckland Mayoral Relief Fund, \$100,000 for the Thames-Coromandel Relief Fund, funding for *Enhanced Taskforce Green to support the clean-up efforts, and over \$14 million provided in civil defence payments.

So to the week ahead, I will be in Auckland tomorrow morning, before, weather permitting, returning to Wellington at some point tomorrow afternoon. First thing tomorrow morning, I have a call with the British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, where the ratification of our fair-trade agreement is likely to be the top item of business.

On Wednesday, I will be in Wellington and hope to deliver my statement on the Government's priorities for the year to Parliament. Final arrangements around the sitting of Parliament are currently being discussed by the Business Committee, who are considering how best to adjust Parliament's programme in light of weather-related disruption.

PM: On Wednesday, I also have a call with Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada, and I'll speak to the Wellington Women's Homelessness Trust fundraising dinner in the evening. On Thursday, I will be home in the Hutt Valley where I will be visiting Orongomai Marae*, as well as the primary school I attended many, many years ago—Waterloo Primary School—and I'll be outlining some plans that the Government has to improve school attendance. In the afternoon, I'll be meeting with Her Royal Highness Princess Anne, *The *Princess Royal, at Government House. And on Friday, I hope to be back in Auckland again to talk with business leaders and those responding to weather events.

Cyclone Gabrielle has thrown a spanner in the works over proceedings in the House, and, as I've said, the parliamentary *Business Committee is deciding how best to adapt and accommodate that, and I'm sure there will be further announcements from either the Speaker or the Leader of the House in due course. I'm happy to open up for questions.

Media: Prime Minister, is it likely that we're going to have a national state of emergency?

PM: We're getting an update every four hours, so NIWA continue to assess the weather event. At the moment the threshold for a national emergency has not yet been met, but we are getting an update every four hours on that.

Media: What were some of the issues you discussed today regarding school truancy?

PM: Well, we'll have a package that we're announcing later in the week. We know that we've got to get kids back into school. We've seen rates of regular attendance at school declining since about 2015. We did have a focus on that in the first few years that we were in Government, and we started to see a bit of a turnaround there. So, actually, despite the initial disruption of COVID-19, 2020 was one of the best years in recent times in terms of school attendance. However, then in 2021 and 2022 we've seen an acceleration in the decline when it comes to attendance. Very difficult to do something about that when you're right in the midst of the pandemic, and one of the messages was if you're sick stay home, and all of those sorts of messages, but now that we are coming through the other side of that we really want to put some concentrated effort on getting kids back into school, and I'll set out all of the specific measures on that later in the week.

Media: How can those community groups access this funding? And can you give an example of, like, the sort of groups that might be accessing it, and also how quickly they'll be able to get a hold of that funding?

PM: Yeah, so those groups will be able to access that through the usual channels that they receive Government support. Examples are one of the groups I visited yesterday, where they're working really hard to provide food; to provide shelter—you know, accommodation to people; to provide clothing to people who have been disrupted. It's quite a wide range of community groups, and so we just want to make sure that we're working alongside them so that they get the support that they need.

Media: Where has this \$11.5 million come from?

PM: At the moment it's been reallocated from underspent COVID relief funding.

Media: Prime Minister, how can you ensure that—I mean, it's not just Aucklanders affected at the moment. How can you ensure that those other communities in Coromandel and Northland will have a look in to this package?

PM: Yeah, so we'll be working with those relevant community groups to make sure that they're getting the support that they need. The Ministry of Social Development* in particular have really good networks and good connections into those groups so that they can make sure those groups know that the funding is available and can access it.

Media: Prime Minister, [*Inaudible*]. So now, a day later, you're announcing this package. What's changed in one day?

PM: Well, we've had a Cabinet meeting, clearly, and we actually brought forward this. We were due to consider this on Wednesday, at a Cabinet committee* on Wednesday—given the scale of the event and the scale of the response that we have seen in the last 24 to 48 hours, we brought forward that decision so that we could get the support out to those community groups faster.

Media: Do you think the package might change regarding—because it's a rolling event, Cyclone Gabrielle, so do you think it might be adjusted, the packages?

PM: In all of these situations we have to adapt and respond as the weather we're dealing with changes. Weather forecasts are notoriously—or weather is notoriously unpredictable. I think our forecasters are doing a fantastic job of keeping us up to date and explaining what the weather system that we're confronting is doing at the moment. But we just have to be ready for the fact that they're still telling us that they think worst is yet to come, so we've got to be ready to adapt to that.

Media: Prime Minister, what are business leaders asking for [*Inaudible*]?

PM: I think in my engagements with the Auckland business community in particular, there has been a real focus on the disruption that's been caused over the last, say, three years by, first, COVID-19 and then other events that they've dealt with in the last little while—natural disasters and so on. I think many of those businesses felt like they were just getting back on to their feet and things were just getting back to normal, and then, of course, the weather has set them back. So they are looking at things from a multitude of levels. They're looking at the ongoing economic picture globally, which is a very, very challenging one, and then, of course, they're looking at the disruption caused by recent natural disasters and natural weather events.

Media: So are you saying to them, are they looking for a bit of a handout? Are they looking for a steer on the policy statement or are there discussions—

PM: It's quite a wide range of issues. You know, labour market shortages clearly are an issue that's front of mind for many businesses, and we'll continue to work with them on that. And that's not just issues around people; it's also issues around getting the right people, the right skills, making sure our education system is delivering the sorts of skills to the workforce that that needs to be doing. It's issues around just regulatory reform and the overall regulatory environment, and we're working to make sure that we're providing as much certainty as quickly as we can to them in those areas. So it is quite a broad spectrum of issues, and you'll see that informing Government decision-making in the coming months.

Media: Prime Minister, you've got some meetings coming up with world leaders. Will you be discussing climate change in light of the two unseasonal storms we're having?

PM: I think we're certainly bound to be asked about the weather in my discussions with other leaders when I have the opportunity to speak with them, and so I'll be sharing New Zealand's experience. And, of course, it is an illustration of the global importance of tackling the challenge of climate change. Other countries are experiencing more extreme weather events as well. I think the globe is increasingly seeing the effects of climate change.

Media: Prime Minister, we've also seen all flights at Auckland Airport cancelled today, and Aucklanders are being advised to stay home if they're able to. So do you think it was sensible and necessary to travel here?

PM: I was already here when the sort of extreme weather started. So I've been in Auckland since Saturday.

Media: A couple of weeks ago, we've obviously had severe flooding in Auckland as well, and first-responders were slammed then and they're being slammed again now. Is there any talk of any package for them?

PM: Yeah, I'm aware that we are bringing in extra first-responders from around the country. So, Wellington Free Ambulance, for example, are sending people up to support the effort with St John's. We will be looking at bringing emergency management people up from the South Island in the event that we need to do that. Many of the people concerned started with the responses a couple of weeks ago. They then started to move into recovery and now they're back into response mode again. They've barely had time to catch a breath. So we will look at bringing people in from around the rest of the country if we need to do that. And that's not just in Auckland; it's also in other areas where they're experiencing the pressure as well.

Media: Truancy's gone up. Do you think we're in a crisis?

PM: Look, I want to get kids back into school, but let's understand a little bit about what the numbers are actually telling us. In the numbers from last year, 2022, the biggest factor in the increase of the number of kids who weren't attending schools were explained absences due to illness—i.e., kids were staying home when they had COVID-19, which is exactly what we told them to do. That really accounts for the largest part of the increase that we saw last year.

Having said that, surveys by the Education Review Office have found that four out of 10 parents think it's OK for their kids to miss more than a week's worth of schooling per term. If you multiple that out, that's a year's worth of schooling in the 13 years that they would be at school that they'll be missing out on. So we've got a cultural shift that we need to make. This isn't just one particular part of the community that we're talking about; this is right the way across the board, including families who are taking their kids off on extended overseas holidays during school term time. We've got to get kids back into school and focused on their learning.

Media: One way the Government can help first-responders is to use the military. Do you think the military is doing enough at the moment?

PM: We've had the military on the ground in Auckland, more or less from the beginning, particularly supporting the clean-up effort. In the last 24 hours they've pivoted to being available and being prepared to respond to more extreme weather, so that includes using their capacity to be able to move people and things around as we respond to the weather. We don't know exactly which areas are going to be the hardest hit and so the military have got the capacity to help us respond to that.

Media: Do you know if they're scattered across the country with their 150 personnel who are working on this?

PM: They are, I think, constantly reviewing where they have got people located, mindful, too, that they don't want to find that they've got all of their capacity in one place and then that gets cut off as well. So that is something that they're actively reviewing on a regular basis.

Media: In your review, have you got a high-priority list of legislation you would like to be passed?

PM: Yeah, we'll set out in the Prime Minister's statement* to Parliament which I'm hoping will happen on Wednesday; obviously, the Business Committee is still yet to determine that. But it will set out our overall priorities for the year, including the legislative programme and legislation that we intend to put forward and put a bit more meat-on-the-bones of some of things that we've been talking about so far.

Media: Has the Princess Anne visit been affected by the weather?

PM: Not to my knowledge so far.

Media: Have you or any other New Zealand officials been briefed on the unfolding situation in Canada? Maybe Five Eyes counterparts?

PM: No, sorry. I'm not sure what you might be referring to there.

Media: The situation where something was shot down over Canada.

PM: Oh. I'm aware that there are issues, in terms of unexplained items within US and Canadian *airspace. Those are ultimately matters for those countries to comment on. That's the protocol that we have; they comment on matters in their own airspace. But obviously they're concerning developments that we're following closely.

Media: What are your thoughts on the latest poll results, perhaps showing you neck and neck with National?

PM: To be honest, I haven't seen them. It's not something that I've had a lot of time to focus on in the last couple of days.

Media: Are you expecting Parliament won't sit this week or is there going to be some change?

PM: No, I am expecting Parliament will sit this week. I think there's just the logistical challenge that a number of members of Parliament are currently in Auckland and we have to figure out how we can get them to Wellington so that they can participate in parliamentary proceedings—myself included.

Having said that, you know, I've been quite comfortable with being here in Auckland; it's given me the opportunity to visit the emergency management teams, to see the on-the-ground preparation that's been taking place, and, also, as I've indicated, to speak to some of those who've been affected by the recent weather events.

Last question.

Media: Prime Minister, has Cabinet made a decision on [*Inaudible*]?

PM: We're considering the business case at the moment, as so we will make announcements in due course. I don't have any announcements to make on that one today.

Media: What about the conservation one? The mining on conservation land?

PM: That hasn't been to Cabinet yet, so the current position remains the same. No bill has been to the Cabinet yet, so, again, there will be announcements on that in due course.

Right, thanks everybody. Cheers.

conclusion of press conference