CLIMATE WARNING

Disaster expert urges a retreat from the coast

Calls for no-go zones and mass population shifts

By KAREN KISSANE

SOME areas of Queensland are so flood-prone they should never have been built on and should be declared no-go zones, with residents bought out and moved out, according to an international disaster expert.

“We shouldn’t regard this [flood] as freakish,” said Professor Ed Blakely, who ran the recovery of New Orleans after hurricane Katrina and was involved in New York’s after 9/11.

“We should assume they are going to occur because of climate change. They are becoming increasingly frequent and far more devastating.”

He warned it was also time to examine the need for Queenslanders to “retreat from the coast” to escape rising sea levels. “It will take 60-75 years, so we have got to start now,” he said. “It’s very important for us to see not just this incident but the long-term trend and learn from it and plan for it.”

Professor Blakely said he had warned a conference of a flood like the current one: “I warned people in Brisbane before hurricane Katrina that this could happen. I had all the CSIRO data that showed a flood that looked very much like the flood that happened. They scoffed.”

Professor Blakely, nick-named “the master of disaster”, is professor of urban policy at Sydney University. Queensland authorities have for some time been examining the state’s future under climate change, with the CSIRO predicting an increased intensity of extreme rainfall events such as the current floods.

A global rise in weather-related disasters such as the Queensland floods was confirmed by Andrew Glikson, an earth and paleoclimate scientist with the Australian National University.

“Cyclones have increased twofold over the past 20 years. Floods have increased threefold,” he said.

He said climate scientists were careful never to point to a single event as evidence of climate change but to examine medium and long-term trends. “It’s happening now, and it’s happening faster than some of the climate-change scientists have dared to predict,” he said.

Chief executive of the Queensland Local Government Association, Greg Hallam, agreed many people were living in areas that should not have been settled. “There are councils that certainly would like to remove housing but can’t. It’s such an expensive business, beyond councils’ means.”

She said engineering defences such as sea walls and levees were expensive and not always successful. “If you can’t defend a suburb or town, logically you would say that you should let them go.

Planned withdrawal is one idea but it has to be thought through very, very carefully.

“Which government is going to stick their neck out and say, ‘I’m sorry, all of you in Graceville, you are going to have to walk away from your properties that are worth around $300,000 each?’”

INSIGHT

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