

WARMUN COMMUNITY — FLOODING

Statement

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [10.02 pm]: We are only half way through May 2011, but I think already this year will come to be known as the year of natural disasters. When we think of flooding in particular, we will in future always think about Queensland and Carnarvon in Western Australia. But I want to add a third place, because about two weeks ago I, along with Hon Eric Ripper and several members of the shadow cabinet, visited the East Kimberley. We went to speak to the Gija people, whose town of Warmun was flooded in March. We visited them at the place where they had been billeted in Kununurra and we drove to Warmun to inspect what was left of their community. The Gija people are in deep shock because of what happened to them. When I tell honourable members the stories they told us, I am sure members will understand why a couple of months later they are still in a deep state of shock.

We all know that Turkey Creek runs through the middle of Warmun, and one might have assumed, upon hearing about the floods, that the creek had burst its banks. In fact, an astonishing phenomenon occurred that nobody currently living in the community could remember ever having happened before. Both Turkey Creek and a smaller tributary that runs into Turkey Creek just outside the town were almost ready to burst their banks, when across the hills came sheet flooding. Warmun is not a big community; if members have not seen the place for themselves, they should go to Google Earth to look at it. It is not a big place, and four metres of water went through from one end to the other of that quite small community. That is what accounted for the devastation to at least half the properties in the community. Fortunately, this happened during the hours of daylight. After inspecting the town site, it was quite obvious that if the water had come up about three hours later when it was dark, it is very likely that there would have been heavy loss of life.

We went first to the Garrjang workers' village, which is the old Ord stage 2 expansion workers' village outside Kununurra. We talked mostly to the old people there, and one of the things that struck me was that almost everybody either had their own tale of heroism or talked about other people in the community. It would be very productive for Western Australian history to collect some of those stories—I know that the people of the community are looking at doing something like that—to record for posterity exactly what happened on that afternoon in the middle of March.

I will tell members a couple of those stories. I spoke to one of Australia's most eminent Indigenous artists, Patrick Mung Mung, who is an elderly man. He told me that he spent a couple of hours that afternoon carrying his grandchildren, one by one, across the rising floodwaters. He said that when he started the water was up to his waist, and that by the time he had finished it was nearly up to his neck, and he was still walking across the floodwaters, taking his grandchildren to higher ground. I spoke to Chris Clare, who is the chief executive officer of the community. Chris has been affected by illness and did not have the physical strength to rescue his wife, who was found clinging to a wire fence, her body being buffeted by the flooding. Fortunately, one of the young fellas came along and managed to haul her to safety. I also spoke to Maggie Fletcher, who is the curator at the Warmun art centre. She told me that for a couple of dreadful minutes she thought she had lost her husband, Gary, who had gone out to rescue some of the paintings, in the chaos that was happening that afternoon. Fortunately, Gary was found to be safe. Chris Clare's wife was rescued and Patrick Mung Mung was able to get all his grandchildren onto higher land.

The evacuation story is quite hair-raising; inevitably, when such events happen, there is so much confusion and chaos that one cannot expect everything to run smoothly. It was evident to me and other members of the Western Australian Labor Party who were with me that all the emergency services did a fantastic job getting everybody out. Nevertheless, people were stuck at the roadhouse for hours and hours, sleeping there and being told that helicopters were on their way, then getting up and getting everyone ready and waiting for hours, only to find that the helicopters were not there. There were times when community members were saying that they did not want to go and that they wanted to stay and salvage what they could. Through those couple of days of confusion, it is a real tribute to the strength of the community and the organisation of the emergency services in one of the most remote areas of the world that they were able, in the end, to get a couple of hundred people safely into Kununurra.

I want honourable members to think about the degree of trauma that has been caused to the Gija people of the Warmun community. We saw a fridge stuck in a tree about four metres off the ground. It had been washed there as the waters went through. All those whitegoods have gone. Members can imagine sitting in this workers' camp. It is not the most salubrious environment that can be imagined. We all know what it is like to live in a very hot climate in what are essentially dongas. Two months later, those people are thinking about what they have lost. It is not just all their whitegoods—their fridges and washing machines—and it is not just all their furniture. All their cars and trucks have gone. Remember, these people use their cars and trucks to find the food that sustains their healthy lifestyle; they use their vehicles for hunting and fishing. There are eight outstations

connected with Warmun, four of which are of quite a significant size. A significant and important part of these people's lives is being able to travel from one place to another, and a lot of that is for hunting and fishing, which sustains their healthy lifestyle. It is very important that we look at how those vehicles are replaced.

Of course, the children have lost not only their clothes, but also all their toys. When members go home tonight, they should look around their home and at their kitchen and think about losing everything. Where are these people going to get cutlery from? Where are they going to get warm clothes from, which they will need when they go back there? We heard the answer that Hon Wendy Duncan gave this afternoon. It is likely that most of those people will be in temporary accommodation in Warmun by 30 June. It will be cold up there then. I know that people in Perth think it is never cold in the East Kimberley, but I assure members that it is very close to the desert and it gets mighty cold at night-time.

I want to pay tribute to some people. I have already spoken about Chris Clare, the CEO, who has done a fantastic job of salvaging a lot of the records and basically holding people together as they go through this very difficult time. I take my hat off to him. Kenneth Rivers, who is the chair of the community, is a wonderful young man who is doing his bit to keep everybody's spirits up. He is working extraordinarily hard every day to start the clearing and the rebuilding. Jeff Gooding, from the Kimberley Development Commission, is chairing the task force that is working to put things back together. Everywhere we went, people paid tribute to him and to the committee. They said that everywhere they went, they got the kind of support they needed.

It is very important that we keep our eye on things such as replacing the early learning centre and the sports facilities. It is very important that young people have something to do in these communities. The swimming pool has gone. It is a massive task of rebuilding the community. I take my hat off to all the people engaged in it.