NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

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HANSARD EXTRACT

CYCLONE TRACY 50TH ANNIVERSARY

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From this destruction arose a story of resilience and renewal. On 28 February 1975 the Darwin Reconstruction Commission was established, and by mid-1978 Darwin's population returned to pre-cyclone levels.

Importantly, we have learnt much from what Cyclone Tracy has taught us. We have improved building codes, and Tracy led to the introduction of more stringent building standards across Australia resulting in structures that are better equipped to withstand extreme weather events. These changes have made buildings more resilient, potentially reducing damage by up to 85% in the event of a similar cyclone.

We have enhanced disaster management. The cyclone highlighted the need for improved emergency management processes, leading to increased public awareness and preparedness measures. This resulted in better warning systems, response strategies and recovery efforts.

Our engineering standards have improved. Cyclone Tracy demonstrated that buildings with engineering input into the design and construction performed considerably better. This led to the incorporation of engineering principles in housing design and construction, improving overall resilience. There is ongoing research and analysis.

The disaster sparked continuous research into wind engineering and building performance during extreme events. Regular reanalysis of design and wind speeds in cyclone-prone regions using up-to-date information and techniques continues to improve our understanding and preparedness.

The experience of Cyclone Tracy has changed how Australians handle disasters together, fostering a stronger sense of community support and unity in the face of natural disasters. These lessons from Cyclone Tracy have saved lives in subsequent cyclones and continue to shape Australia's approach to disaster preparedness and response.

As we approach the 50th anniversary of this catastrophic event, we remember not only the devastation but also the indomitable spirit of Territorians and all Australians who came together to rebuild. Cyclone Tracy remains a powerful reminder of our vulnerability to nature's forces and our capacity for resilience in the face of adversity. Today Darwin stands as a modern city, its buildings designed to endure the harsh climate of northern Australia. It is a living testament to human perseverance and ingenuity.

As we move forward let us carry the lessons of Cyclone Tracy with us, ensuring we remain prepared, resilient and united in the face of future challenges.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, I thank everyone in the House for their heartfelt reflections on Cyclone Tracy.

My reflection is a personal one. My family originally came to Australia in 1968 and emigrated permanently in 1971. This was my maternal grandparents, mum, aunt and Uncle Nazmul—N-A-Z-M-U-L. I spell my uncle's name because I will tell his story, and he recounted to me the other day, 'If you say anything, get my name spelt right, because on every memorial it is spelt Maznul'. I said, 'All right; I will see what I can do.'

For the first time since coming here after escaping war, my family decided to make a return journey to Bangladesh to visit other family members. Fortuitously, my maternal grandparents, my mum and my aunt went to Bangladesh for Christmas 1974, leaving behind my Uncle Nazmul to hold the fort—a 17-year-old kid to mow the lawn and look after the house, who was told it would probably be fairly uneventful and all would be well.

He continued to go from their place in Nakara to work at Bunnings. He said that he had no plans for Christmas Eve, so a mate of his, Alan Morris, said to him, 'There's a birthday party on. Let's go there tonight.' Because they were young, cavalier and did not know what cyclone warnings were about, they thought that sounded like a reasonably good idea.

They headed off to what was then the Berrimah Tavern, now the Hidden Valley Tavern, for a birthday do. All through the night cyclone warnings kept coming through, and they continued not to take them seriously until events wrapped up around midnight and the wind was starting to howl. He recalls the story of them both being in a car, driving towards the house in Nakara and suddenly realising the car was moving sideways and not forward. The winds were so strong even at that time that they were being dragged onto the median strip. That is when they got a sense that something serious was happening.

From 1 am through 2 am the wind howled, and people started to worry in a serious way. The family of six, the Morris family, kindly took in my uncle that night. They all huddled together, initially in the bathroom until that blew apart, at which point they all shifted. I remember him saying that they thought they were safe and secure in the bathroom with everything set up and then the roof blew off, so they were sitting there literally watching the sky fall in from around the four walls. They had to evacuate from the bathroom.

All seven of them ended up in a single toilet holding the walls together all night with their backs to the wall—a la Star Wars—trying to keep them from caving in. He said it was a long and surreal night. The presiding memory he has in terms of audio landscape was of car horns going crazy because houses and other things were falling on the cars. There were alarms and sirens going off all night long.

Finally, at about 5 am, my uncle recalls walking out with his hosts onto the streets. He said it was like an episode of one of those television shows where they walk out after an apocalypse wondering whether they are the last people left on Earth. Everyone started slowly creeping out at 5 am, and it was still muggy and spitting with rain. Suddenly, they heard small pockets of people coming out saying, 'Now what?'

They were proximate to the area of Jingili, Nakara and the Airport Hotel, so they decided, en masse, to wander to the Airport Hotel because that was the best bet they had. A bit like those episodes where you find other survivors of some apocalyptic fate, there were people standing at the door ready to welcome them with open arms, saying, 'Come in. There's food and shelter.' The Salvation Army was doing its bit.

They ended up staying there for three days and two nights. In amongst it all, people forget that when disasters like this happen there is all manner of knock-on effects. There was a mass outbreak of food poisoning at the time, which people forget. When there is not a lot of sanitation, that is a real challenge.

Other than trips to the old Darwin hospital at Myilly Point, there was not much movement happening while people tried to find their feet again. Eventually they made their way from the Airport Hotel to the actual airport, because by this stage the dictate was out that able-bodied men should stick around to help rebuild and younger people under 18, as well as women and children, should evacuate and get on planes to wherever they could go.

My family had arrived only a few years earlier; they did not know anyone anywhere else. My 17-year-old uncle did not know anyone in the rest of the country, so he arbitrarily picked Brisbane. Before he knew it, he was on a plane to Brisbane, having vaguely heard in the past from my grandfather that we knew somebody in Brisbane. Before he had gotten on the plane he wandered back to the house in Nakara. The house was long gone, but he could identify it from the curtains. Somehow some curtains had survived and from those curtains he could piece together a few bits of clothes. With $50 in his pocket, some mismatched clothing and a curtain, he made his way to Brisbane.

Communication was not what it is now, so for a good period of time my grandparents did not know whether he was dead or alive because they were on the other side of the planet. My uncle was able to connect with the local refugee centre in Brisbane and then with the local mosque. It was a reminder for me that there are so many people around Australia who contributed to helping Territorians in the wake of the disaster, and we should be grateful for their contribution.

My grandparents, mum and aunt eventually worked out that my uncle was alive and in Brisbane, so when they returned from Bangladesh they immediately went there. They then wanted to come straight back to Darwin but unfortunately had nothing to come back to, so they had to detour via Canberra, which is why I have to keep confessing to being born in Canberra, rather than in Darwin which was probably how it should have been.

They eventually returned to Darwin for opportunity, not least because this was a place willing to offer them a housing commission home, work and an opportunity to rebuild and make a contribution enduringly and permanently. That is why my family came back and stayed for the long haul.

It is wonderful to hear all the stories, and it is difficult to hear a lot of the stories of hardship at that time. I know it is still a triggering and traumatising event for a lot of people still 50 years later. I would say this as a glimmer of hope: my uncle's presiding recollection of the whole thing was of the strength, courage and good humour of a lot of Territorians who, having survived that night, all banded together and said, 'Well, that probably will not happen again, will it?'

It is important to know the laconic wit, humour and Territorian character shone through at a time of crisis. I hope that we will be prepared in future and resilient in the face of adversity. I am grateful for the fact that

we have a legislature that is also 50 years old to ensure we have the resilient community and structures in place to look after the Northern Territory should anything of that scale ever befall us again.

Thank you for the opportunity to share that small anecdote, and thank you to everyone who has contributed with anecdotes of their own in relation to Cyclone Tracy.

Mr GUYULA (Mulka): Madam Speaker, I acknowledge 50 years since Cyclone Tracy and acknowledge the survivors.

In 1974 I was coming home from a boarding school in Nhulunbuy, Dhupuma College. I remember being out in the bush with my family on country at Mirrngatja on the edge of the eastern end of the Arafura Swamp. I had flown home for the holidays, and we were living in a paperbark hut. Every season we would move around country from higher hills where we have a bark hut and towards the swamp, an area where we created paperbark huts. In some areas during the Wet Season we would go back to higher hills and find shelters that we could live around, and that is how we survived—by preparing. Our elders and leaders knew what to expect during those times.

At Mirrngatja on Christmas Eve the sky was clear, and the weather had been sucked into Darwin towards the west. It was beautiful dry weather, and it was a surprise to hear that a cyclone had hit Darwin. On Christmas Day we were working on the airstrip, and I turned on the radio. There were no phones and no communications, but we had a radio to listen to music while I was working, helping to clear the airstrip for a missionary to come over to bring in rations. During that time people were hunting crocodiles and we were trading.

I turned on the radio to listen to music. The ABC news came on to announce that Darwin had been flattened by a cyclone. I turned around to my father and said, 'Dad, Darwin has been flattened'. He and a lot of people used to walk from Milingimbi and Galiwinku towards Darwin and back again, so they knew where the places were. They lived in Bagot community and used to walk back and forth, so he knew. It was surprising to hear what had happened. It was a shock for them, and they were worried for all the people in Darwin. At that time, I vaguely remember turning on the radio again and hearing there were 45 lives lost. It was serious, and we started to worry about people from our communities, especially in Bagot and other areas.

Later we heard there was family living in Darwin, which was another worry; would there be bad news from Darwin for our community? As there was no communication, we had to wait to hear what had happened. Later we heard lots of people had stayed in Bagot. People told stories afterwards about how frightening it was. Sometime later I heard the story of a fridge being found on the Winnellie water tank, which told us how powerful it was. When I drove past Winnellie and saw the height of the water tower, which is still there, they said that is where a big fridge from a house had been blown to. That was a serious matter.

My wife said her family was in Darwin at the hospital at Myilly Point. There were many women brought to Darwin to deliver babies when the cyclone hit. They were frightened and did not know what was happening.

When people lived in the bush most cyclones and heavy storms that came through were not seen as a threat because often they brought good hunting and places where we could gather food. We knew there was shelter close by in the caves. There are gaps between houses. The trees and hills are not as bulky, big and dangerous like we saw with iron and bits of timber flying around here, which was life-threatening. Even cars can be flying around as debris.

People used to know where we could go to shelter in strong weather. There was not much debris that could fly around. People gathered wild honey from cracks of fallen tree branches. There were berries and other stuff that we lived on. As I said, it was not as hazardous as the cars and other heavy material. Before housing we could find shelters in the rocks and stuff on Earth.

Today we need to make sure that we have safe shelters when this happens. We need to be prepared, as the ancestors were, and look after our community. In remote communities we need proper permanent shelters. Preparation steps include our community leaders being ready for storm surges and cyclones. In places like Nhulunbuy we need the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) to have manned weather stations so we can be prepared.

The experience of those who survived Tracy has informed the protections we now have. It caused great devastation and tragedy, so it is important that we learn from that experience so that our communities are protected and made safe into the future.