

## **Catholic Mission Media Release**

### **Spirituality Centre Becomes Flood Refuge**

A spirituality centre funded through Catholic Mission's Home Fund is providing refuge for Aboriginal people in the remote East Kimberley region of Western Australia after their homes were destroyed by flash floods.

Heavy rain on Sunday March 13 preceded the flood which saw Turkey Creek - which runs through the Gija Aboriginal community at Warmun – explode into a muddy torrent. Floodwaters inundated the community and swept away many homes, leaving others sodden and uninhabitable.

The flood also swept through the adjoining Ngalangangpum ("Mother and Child") Catholic school, flooding gardens, school buildings and the homes of three Sisters of St Joseph who live on the school grounds.

The flood necessitated the evacuation of 500 people, many of whom took refuge at the nearby Mirrilingki Spirituality Centre (Warmun Retreat Centre) where managers Alasdair and Janyne Brand accommodated and fed the distressed people.

The Bishop of Broome Diocese, Bishop Chris Saunders, expressed his relief that "no one was seriously injured or killed" by the flood. He extended his gratitude to the couple managing Mirrilingki, Alasdair and Janyne Brand, for making the Gija people welcome. "They've done a marvellous job working 16 hours a day to provide shelter and food to hundreds of distressed people. I'm very thankful to them."

Bishop Saunders said floodwaters continue to isolate Warmun by road but helicopters had airlifted most of the community out of the area to temporary accommodation in the towns of Halls Creek and Kununurra.

"It's been a huge upheaval for the Gija. A lot of families have been separated. It's a real social dislocation for them, they've lost everything." He said counselling was available through government agencies and that the Sisters of St Joseph, "with whom the Gija have a very strong relationship, have moved with them to the new places, so there is pastoral support too."

Bishop Saunders confirmed that the famous Warmun Art Gallery was also hit by the flood. The gallery is renowned for showcasing Gija paintings by the likes of Rover Thomas, Shirley Bray, George and Patrick Mung Mung, plus the works of dozens of emerging artists.

Initial news reports said the gallery's entire collection had been destroyed, but Bishop Saunders disputed this. "Yes water went the gallery and some works of art are lost, but anything above 1.5 metres was saved, including valuable older works which are kept in storage on site. We can't assess the situation till the roads open again."

Through the Home Mission Fund, Catholic Mission is a proud supporter of the works and programs of the Diocese of Broome. The Mirrilingki Spirituality Centre in Warmun is a place where faith formation, workshops and dialogue with indigenous people happens. The centre is able to accommodate families and groups for extended stays.

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Lost in the flood? A Gija painting, pictured at right, depicts Ngalangangpum (School in Warmun. Rendered in paints mixed from earth and ochre, the artist depicts the school, on the right; the gum tree in the school grounds (symbolising reconciliation, as it was formerly a place where authorities punished Aborigines) and, on left, the Gija community. (photo Dan McAloon)



Exterior of Mirrilingki Spirituality Centre.

The flood sweeps through “Ngapuny” (The Holy Place) an open air chapel where the Gija community celebrates Mass and the sacraments.

