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■ At least 59 dead as buildings collapse

■ Hundreds missing as waters rise

■ Region braces for tornado threat

## Council to face public inquiry

Tuck Thompson

ALLEGATIONS that a bloc of Gold Coast councillors misled voters and flaunted the law through their association with developers will be publicly probed by the Crime and Misconduct Commission.

CMC Chairman Robert Needham announced the inquiry following months of outrage over allegations of lies by candidates and a secret developer trust fund during last year's council election.

A similar scheme, probed earlier this year in NSW, led to the dismissal of the Tweed Shire Council.

Mr Needham said the commission last week decided an open inquiry was the best way to restore public confidence.

"The inquiry will investigate allegations that Gold Coast councillors have breached provisions of the Local Government Act," he said. "These include the possible misleading of voters ... disclosure of election gifts and possible failures to declare material personal interest."

"It is a significant step, but it was considered that the information, the material and the concern had reached a stage where that step was necessary to take."

Phil Gray, president of the Helensvale Residents Association, said of the decision: "I think the air needs to be cleared. What interests do councillors have when they're making decisions that affect all of our lives?"

Irene Wareing, spokeswoman for the council watchdog group Citizens for Democracy, said: "I'm extremely happy. I think there's a terrible amount to be investigated that we don't know."

Terms of reference and hearing dates are yet to be established.

Mr Needham will lead the questioning with the support of counsel assisting.

Mr Needham said 30 people, including Gold Coast Mayor Ron Clarke, had been compelled to produce records.

Cr Clarke welcomed the inquiry and said he was confident the allegations would be proved "baseless".

Part of the CMC's evidence is a 32-page dossier compiled by Gold Coast councillor Peter Young, who was praised for his tenacity by Mr Gray.

"He's copped a lot of abuse, but he kept this matter before the public and the minister," he said.

The NSW inquiry, headed by a Sydney University professor, had broader terms of reference, which included improper behaviour but not misconduct.

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Holbrook Mohr

FLOODWATERS from Hurricane Katrina were overwhelming levees in central New Orleans last night as the death toll from the catastrophic storm climbed to 59 - a number likely to increase as rescuers reach the hardest-hit areas.

The breach sent a churning sea of water coursing across the western part of the city and residents who had ridden out the brunt of Katrina faced a second more insidious threat as floodwaters continued their ascent well into the night.

At least one hospital was evacuating patients by air.

In neighbouring Mississippi, authorities said Katrina had unleashed a tidal wave on beachfront communities when it struck on Monday and killed 54 people.

Thirty of those died when a 6m storm surge destroyed the St Charles apartment complex in casino resort town of Biloxi, CNN reported.

The total does not include 11 deaths in South Florida when a much weaker Katrina first made landfall last week.

The Federal Government began rushing baby formula, communications equipment, generators, water and ice into hard-hit areas of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, along with doctors, nurses and first-aid supplies.

Tens of thousands of people have been left homeless. The US Defence Department sent experts to help with search-and-rescue operations.

Until last night most of the worst flooding in New Orleans was in the city's poor eastern suburbs.

But authorities warned that the central business area was now facing disaster.

Karen Troyer Caraway, vice president of Tulane University Hospital, said water was rising rapidly and had already reached the top of the first floor.

"It's essentially running down Canal Street. We have whitecaps on Canal Street," she told CNN.

Rescue crews were working frantically last night to save hundreds of people trapped by floodwaters in the city's outer suburbs.

"We've got a massive



search-and-rescue situation going on," Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco said after Katrina slammed into New Orleans, leaving entire neighbourhoods under water.

"We've pulled literally hundreds of people out of the

waters. We believe there are hundreds more out there." Forecasters said that as the storm moves north over the next few days, it may spawn tornadoes over the southeast and swamp the Tennessee and Ohio valleys with a potentially ruinous 20cm or more of rain.

With winds of 240km/h, the storm hit the mainland over Louisiana on Monday at category four and gradually lost strength as it moved inland. Downgraded yesterday to a tropical storm with winds of 95km/h, Katrina was last night pushing its

way through northern Mississippi. Katrina knocked out power to more than a million people from Louisiana to the Florida Panhandle - the westernmost areas of the southern state. Ten major hospitals in New Orleans were running

on emergency backup power. "It will be unsafe to return to the coastal area for several days," Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour told evacuees on Monday. "Be patient. Don't be in a hurry to go back." According to preliminary assessments by AIR Worldwide

Corp, a risk modelling firm, the property and casualty insurance industry faces as much as \$US26 billion (\$A34.68 billion) in claims from Katrina.

Local petrol prices affected, Page 3 Mississippi's fatal blow, Page 16 The economic impact, Page 31 - additional reporting wire services



WHEN the levee breaks ... New Orleans residents move to higher ground, *main picture*; Hurricane Katrina makes landfall, *top right*, damage to the New Orleans Hyatt hotel, *centre*, and residents inspect damage from the hurricane, *above*. Pictures: AP/Reuters



## Day Broncos coach dared to smile

Barry Dick and Steve Ricketts

HE has a reputation for not smiling often and he's had nothing to grin about for the past month. But Wayne Bennett's stern facade cracked yesterday.

The Brisbane Broncos coach had just been told his superstar captain Darren Lockyer might be ready to return from injury for the

top-of-the-table clash with the Eels in Parramatta on Friday night.

The Broncos' chief playmaker has been out with a torn hamstring since the loss to St George Illawarra at Suncorp Stadium on August 21.

Since then, the Broncos have lost to Penrith and the Roosters, to drop from outright National Rugby League competition leaders to third place on percentages. If they

win on Friday night they still can finish first and claim \$100,000 in prizemoney and the J. J. Giltinan Shield.

With a host of injuries - representative players Shane Webcke, Dane Carlaw, Corey Parker, Casey McGuire and Justin Hodges will not play this week - Lockyer's return for the sold-out game at Parramatta Stadium would be a huge boost. But it is by no means certain.

"I'm pretty keen to play, but only if I think I can get through the game," Lockyer said. "The hamstring felt fine but the physio wants to see how I pull up in the morning."

Bennett's response to Lockyer's impressive training effort at Red Hill yesterday was typically more taciturn.

"We'll see," he said last night. "We won't be taking any chances with him."

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**THANKS FOR HELPING US TAKE OFF.**

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We couldn't have made it this far without the support of all our guests and staff. You really do take the cake. Hip hip hooray.