Lam hit with roar of a lion

CYCLONE Lam, a category 4 storm, made landfall between Milingimbi Island and Elcho Island at 2am on February 19, 2015.

It was the strongest storm to hit the Northern Territory since Cyclone Monica in 2006 and caused about $82 million worth of damage.

Cyclone Lam formed from the monsoon trough on February 12 in the Coral Sea and moved west.

The system crossed over Cape York into the Gulf of Carpentaria and was declared a Category 1 cyclone and named Lam by the Bureau of Meteorology on February 16.

Cyclone Lam strengthened to a Category 4 cyclone – with maximum sustained winds of 185km/h and gusts of 205km/h – on February 19 before making landfall and wreaking havoc on Arnhem Land communities Milingimbi, Ramingining, Galiwinku, Gapuwiyak and Mapuru Outstation.

Ramingining and Milingimbi suffered direct hits while Galiwinku on Elcho Island suffered the worst damage.

About 50 homes in Galiwinku were smashed beyond repair while a further 30 were severely damaged.

The cyclone damaged the airstrip and littered it with debris, so nothing could land.

Phone lines were down, there was no mobile phone reception, water or sewerage, and the barge landing was all but destroyed.

In Ramingining, Gavin Webb’s roof was torn off by the storm, which sounded “like a train rolling through the scrub”.

Then for one beautiful, scary moment, Lam was silent.

“I’m looking at the sky and there are hundreds of seagulls,” Mr Webb told the NT News as the eye of Tropical Cyclone Lam passed over his roofless home in Ramingining.

“I think they’re all lost and flying from the coast. It’s pretty calm right now.”

“I’m praying it’s all over. It’s still drizzling.

“When it was at its peak it was like a train rolling through scrub.

“The noise was really, really loud.”

Ramingining clinic worker Rhonda Golsby-Smith said about half the town lost power about 6.30pm on the Thursday before the cyclone hit when a large tree crashed through power lines.

She said the storm built through the night and the most destructive part was between 2-3am, shortly before the eye passed over the town.

Ms Golsby-Smith said winds in the back half of the storm were not as bad as the front.

“There wasn’t as much noise, but there weren’t as many trees for the wind to make noise in,” she said.

In response to the damage caused by Cyclone Lam, the NT Government declared a State of Emergency for Milingimbi, Ramingining, Galiwinku, Gapuwiyak and Mapuru Outstation.

And a team from NSW Rural Fire Services shipped 32 tents to the island to create a mini city for the 300 to 400 displaced residents.

The tents, originally used to house people displaced from NSW bushfires, were mounted on the football ground, which became known as Camp Elcho and remained there for four months until transportable homes were set up for the residents.

Some residents could be living in the transportable accommodation for years until their original homes are rebuilt as part of a $90 million recovery effort across all the affected communities in Arnhem Land.

East Arnhem Regional Council’s Kaye Thurlow estimated as many as 600 people had been displaced.

She said some of them had moved to communities on the Gove Peninsula.