Flood disaster spreads in China

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As water levels continue to rise, China's major cities in the central Yangtze region and the country's northeast are threatened with inundation and serious flood damage in the next few days.

Harbin, an industrial city of three million and capital of the northeastern province of Heilongjiang, is endangered by flooding from the Songhua river. Heavy rain plus water from the nearby flooded Nenjiang river has combined to create a river crest estimated to be two metres higher than the city's major protective dykes.

Tens of thousands of soldiers are desperately working to reinforce the levees around Harbin before the arrival of the river crest. Flooding has already destroyed three sluice gates 50 kilometres to the city's west, forcing thousands of people fighting the floods to flee.

Further up the Nenjiang river, large areas of the countryside are underwater and extensive damage has been inflicted on the major Daqing oilfield, which accounts for nearly half China's oil production. At least 577 villages have been flooded and 36,000 houses destroyed. One major highway and two railway lines have been washed away.

Two of the three dykes that protect the 2.5 million residents of Daqing and the oilfields have already been breached. Official reports indicate that more than 2,500 of the 25,000 oil wells have been inundated. Thousands of oil workers have been stranded by floodwaters.

To the west of Heilongjiang, in the province of Inner Mongolia, the first official reports have been released of major outbreaks of cholera, typhoid and dysentery among the victims of the flooding. Over 250,000 houses have been destroyed and 910,000 people are cut off from assistance.

In central China, Wuhan, a major industrial city of seven million, is bracing itself for the sixth flood crest in as many weeks. The city of Honghu to Wuhan's west has been facing river levels three metres above the danger mark, under conditions where the major dyke defences had already collapsed in many places.

Confronted with a growing national calamity, the Beijing regime has tried to deflect public attention from the causes of the worst flooding in decades and from their own responsibility for the crisis. Political leaders have exhorted soldiers to 'do or die' efforts and have attacked reports of extensive damage and death.

A report published in the *China Daily* on 13 August however provided a revealing summary of the conclusions reached by the Chinese State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) about the reasons for the present flooding along the Yangtze.

As the tributaries which form the Yangtze River emerge from the mountainous regions into the middle Yangtze plain, a complex system of lakes and wetlands serves as a natural catchment area--one of the main natural defences against flooding. This is supplemented by a complex system of man-made reservoirs and dykes.

Over the past four decades, the government has weakened this system by unplanned land uses--especially excessive logging, cultivation, construction and industrial development. The result has been increased silt, industrial waste and other solids flowing into the rivers and wetlands.

The *China Daily* listed the following figures:

• The storage capacity of the Dongting Lake, the main catchment of the middle Yangtze, has shrunk from 29.3 billion cubic metres in 1949 to 17.8 billion cubic metres today due to the build up of silt deposits. Dongting used to flood once every 41 years, now it floods every five years.

• In the 1950s, there were 1,066 freshwater lakes in the area around the middle and lower Yangtze plains. By the early 1990s the number had shrunk to only 182, and the water area had been slashed by 46 percent.

• Of 86,000 reservoirs in the middle and lower Yangtze regions, 40 percent have been silted up.

The lack of proper planning is confirmed by another government report issued in June by the Ministry of Land and Resources. It cited 3.82 million cases of illegal land use involving local and regional officials trying to circumvent the government's own loose planning

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guidelines for industry and construction.

The huge loss in water storage area in the Yangtze region is clearly a major factor in the present flooding--the water literally has nowhere to go, other than to break its banks. Other factors include the silting of the Yangtze riverbed and government neglect of dykes and other flood defences.

The official death toll of 2,000 has not been updated since August 6, before some of the most serious Yangtze flooding and the impact of the floods in the northeast. Refugees have described the figure as 'vastly underestimated'. International reporters have been barred from the flood stricken areas.

Conservative estimates put the economic damage of the flooding at US$22 billion, cutting a full 1 percent off the country's economic growth. In the agricultural sector, the growth rate is predicted to be zero or negative.

In a public speech on August 13 aimed at forestalling any social unrest, Chinese President Jiang Zemin promised: 'Immediately after the flooding, efficient measures will be taken to build water-control facilities and raise the capacity for flood prevention.'

But the obvious question is why the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy has done so little over the last 50 years to implement 'efficient measures' to combat the frequent flooding along China's major rivers. After the Yangtze floods in 1954 which killed 30,000 and left one million homeless, Mao Zedong made similar empty promises.

Flood prevention was always seen by the mass of people who live on the Yangtze as one of the tasks of the Chinese Revolution. Not only have the Beijing Stalinists done nothing to limit flooding, their lack of proper planning, official corruption, neglect and incompetence have contributed greatly to the present disaster.

See Also:
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