

Asia's monsoon floods affect tens of millions

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Tens of millions of people have been affected by floods and typhoons in Asia, from the Indian subcontinent to China, to South East Asia, through to the Korean peninsula and Japan. More than 1,500 people have been killed since late June. Damage totaling billions of dollars has been inflicted on countries that are already in serious economic distress.

The damage is not simply the result of tropical storms and flooded rivers. These are annual events that change only in the degree of severity. People have died or been made homeless because they are poor and politically powerless—forced to live in low-lying areas prone to flooding, on slopes susceptible to landslides, or in houses incapable of withstanding strong winds. Across Asia, evidence is surfacing of official neglect and indifference, lack of elementary flood defences and precautions, and the incapacity of governments in some of the world's poorest nations to deal with the scale of the disaster.

Over the last fortnight, Typhoon Olga has deluged much of South East Asia before striking the central coast of the Korean peninsula. Every year an average of 20 such tropical storms develop in the north-west Pacific, sometimes affecting areas as large as the west coast of the United States.

Manila, the capital of the **Philippines**, and three surrounding provinces were declared “a state of calamity” on August 2 after 300 millimetres of rain fell in two days, over half the average August rainfall. Large parts of the city of 10 million people were covered by water, damaging homes, vehicles and businesses.

Flash flooding of the Marikina River engulfed Manila's eastern suburbs, totally submerging entire areas. Worst affected were the inhabitants of the shantytowns on disused land along the river bank. At least 2,000 shacks were washed away and more than 60,000 people forced to flee to higher ground. Thousands more were marooned on roofs.

On August 4, a landslide tore through a working class housing estate built on unstable hilly land in the suburb of Antipolo. Describing the impact, the Filipino Defense Secretary Orlando Mercado said the “houses collapsed like an accordion”. Rescue workers have recovered 23 bodies and up to 40 residents are missing, believed to be buried under rubble.

The death toll across the Philippines is thought to be at least 92 and the extent of damage has still not been estimated. With a foreign debt of \$US45 billion, a contracting economy and facing demands from the World Bank and IMF for further

restructuring, the Filipino government has neither the will nor the means to provide anything more than cosmetic assistance to those affected.

A similar situation exists in **Vietnam**. The heaviest rainfalls in 20 years have provoked flooding in the southern central provinces of Binh Thuan, Lam Dong and Dac Lac. The country's major arterial highway, which links Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, was impassable for three days.

According to the Vietnamese government, 34 people are dead and 43 missing. Thousands of homes have been destroyed and major damage inflicted on crops, livestock, bridges, roads, fisheries and fishing boats. About 22,000 people are in “extreme need” of food and clean water. The provincial government has appealed for international assistance. Damage is estimated at \$US12 million, yet initial relief measures total only \$US350,000.

Floods in southern **Cambodia**, one of the poorest countries of South East Asia, cut the main port town of Sihanoukville off from the capital Phnom Penh, with seven kilometres of road under two metres of water. Many people in rural villages were forced to flee. The coastal town of Kampot suffered flash floods that destroyed dozens of homes. Thousands are said to be homeless and eight children are feared drowned.

In **Thailand**, flooding affected much of the province of Chantaburi to the east of Bangkok. Six people are known to have died and some 90,000 have had their homes damaged. On August 4, the Bangkok government requested the assistance of the military to prepare for floods expected to affect the city this week due to a new low pressure system developing in the South China Sea.

As Typhoon Olga approached Korea, it brought heavy rains to southern **Japan**. A landslide in the town of Takachiho killed two people and forced the evacuation of other residents. The typhoon's epicentre, with winds reaching 108 km (66 miles) per hour, wrought extensive damage on the central regions of the Korean peninsula on August 3, adding to the turmoil caused by a torrential downpour of over 800 millimetres of rain in four days.

In **North Korea**, already stricken by a four-year famine, reports before the typhoon hit were that 40,000 hectares of farming land had been flooded and that there had been “no small loss of human life”. Unconfirmed reports are that 42 people died. Olga crossed the coast at the North Korean port

city of Haeju, and then moved toward the North Korean capital of Pyongyang, so it is likely far more damage has been caused. The bodies of two drowned North Korean soldiers have been pulled from rivers in South Korea.

South Korea has suffered at least 40 dead, with 24 people still listed as missing. Around 25,000 have been made homeless, close to 10,000 homes damaged and 36,000 hectares of farmland ruined. The capital Seoul, population 10 million, was brought to a standstill by the flooding of the Han River, with the city's airport and major highways closed for three days. Damage estimates stand at \$332 million.

North of Seoul, the Kyongg province towns of Munsan, Paju and Yonkak remain affected. Residents are accusing the government of failing to strengthen levees and flood defences after the area was flooded in 1996 and again last year. The *Korean Herald* of August 4 quoted a resident of Munsan, Kim Chul-woo, as saying “they made promises and announced blueprints, but what's the difference?”

Similar accusations are being raised in the north-east Seoul suburb of Nowon-gu, which also flooded last year. The same *Korean Herald* report cites a resident of Nowon-gu, Park Kwi-hyang: “It seems to me that some officials don't know what they are paid for, and nobody in public office is actively pushing plans to control flooding in the northern Kyonggi and Nowon-gu area. The same thing's going to happen again next summer, if they don't do something.”

Another tropical storm, Typhoon Paul, is now developing to the south of Japan and is expected to strike the Koreas over coming days. It will be the third typhoon to cross the peninsula this year.

While the effects of Typhoon Olga on South East Asia and Korea have attracted substantial international media coverage, the most severe flooding has afflicted the Indian subcontinent and China.

Torrential rains since late June have caused flooding along the tributaries of the Ganges River. In **Nepal**, over 100 people are dead and dozens missing. In **India**, the northern parts of Bihar state has been devastated with more than 400,000 hectares of land submerged, 7,000 homes destroyed and over four million people in 2,500 villages inundated. The death toll stands at 155 and grows with each new update. Across India, more than 300 have died in flooding and landslides.

A number of rivers that cross Bihar remain at dangerous heights and concerns have been expressed that many levees have suffered serious erosion. The situation has become a political issue in the state, with an opposition party accusing the state government of ignoring warnings about the likelihood of severe floods and taking no measures to strengthen defences.

With much of **Bangladesh** occupying the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and dozens of other rivers, the country is again experiencing severe flooding. Already one million people in rural areas have been displaced or cut off by flood waters. Large tracts of farmland are submerged. The death toll is

currently 35.

A report published on August 3 by the Bangladesh Department of Environment on the impact of last year's flood on the capital Dhaka shows what can be expected if the urban areas flood again. It states that two million people in the city lived in flooded conditions for up to 65 days, without electricity, gas, telephones or functioning services such as rubbish collection. About 236,000 people, mostly poor, were made homeless and forced into relief camps where food supplies were erratic. The fouling of the city's water by sewerage created conditions in which 115,790 people contracted severe diarrhea, 178 of whom died.

By far the worst flooding in Asia has been on the Yangtze River system in **China**, along which 400 million people live. Over 66 million people have been directly affected and the evidence of longstanding neglect of flood prevention is widespread. (See: Neglect of flood control threatens China for second successive year)

Last year's floods claimed more than 4,000 lives and \$US30 billion of damage was wrought on the country. So far this year, floods have left 725 dead, forced five million to flee their homes and caused more than \$7 billion in damage. Those most affected are poor peasants who have been settled on land reclaimed from lakes or river flood plains, or in areas where flood defences are inadequate.

Attention is now focused on the Yellow River districts with warnings that higher than average rainfalls may cause flooding of such scope that it will overwhelm the inadequate protection along the river. An estimated 35 percent of levees do not meet construction standards or are not high enough. Over 78 million people are not protected by levees at all.

The international media coverage has barely touched on the scope of these disasters, let alone broached the issue of why such calamities repeatedly occur. Television makes use of particularly dramatic scenes for brief news stories before moving on to next business. It is accepted as a *fait accompli* that the populations of these nations will suffer floods, famines, disease and misery. Flood appeals launched by international charities will be referred to and then the matter will be forgotten—until next year when a similar disaster will befall millions of people.



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