

Death toll in eastern India cyclone may top 10,000

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Unofficial reports estimate that more than 10,000 people have perished as a result of the super cyclone that hit the coastal areas of the eastern Indian State of Orissa on October 29.

The storm lasted 24 hours and reached a speed of 260 kilometres per hour. It is believed that 15 to 20 million out of population of 35 million in the state have been affected by the cyclone and ensuing floods. State officials report that 1,500 villages were swept into oblivion and 2 million people lost their homes.

On November 5 the state government issued a statement estimating that 798,000 acres of crops had been destroyed and 275,714 houses damaged. This was the second natural disaster to hit Orissa, one of most poverty-stricken states in India, in less than two weeks. Ten days after the cyclone, key roads in the state remained blocked and power installations and communication links were still down.

This cyclone could rank as the most destructive storm ever to hit India, with the death toll and property damage exceeding that of the 1971 cyclone that took 10,000 lives.

According to Orissa's special relief commissioner, D.N. Padhi, the confirmed number of dead as of November 5 was 1,381. Of these, 765 were reported in Jagatsinghpur district. As of yet neither the state nor central government authorities have provided an official estimate of the overall toll in human deaths and property losses.

One senior army officer involved in the rescue operation, who wanted to remain anonymous, told the *Associated Press* that the death toll was between 10,000 and 20,000. The relief commissioner, speaking to *Reuters* earlier in the week, had a lower figure. "My 'guesstimate' of the death toll is 3,000 plus," he said.

But Bijay Mahapatra, a leader of the Biju Janatha Dal

(BJD), a regional party in Orissa allied to the BJP-led central government coalition, toured the heavily hit port town of Paradip and another badly hit district, Kendrapara. He said, "At least 5,000 people have died in Paradip alone and the figure is definitely going to be more than double if you take into account the devastation in other heavily damaged areas."

Rescue teams still have not reached the hardest-hit areas. Tens of thousands of people who lost their homes and all other belongings are struggling with hunger and the threat of disease.

Standing crops in all nine coastal districts have been destroyed and tens of thousands of livestock have perished. The danger of epidemics arises from the fact that people are forced to drink contaminated water polluted by the decomposed carcasses of humans and animals. Many children have contracted chronic diarrhoea and aid officials warn that the condition could become fatal unless properly treated within the next few days.

In Paradip the storm levelled all buildings with the exception of those constructed out of concrete. Media commentators who visited the town describe it as "roofless". Dead bodies can be seen on every corner and the stench of decomposing human flesh and animal carcasses hangs heavy in the air.

Survivors estimate the death toll in the town and nearby villages at 7,000 to 8,000. Most of the victims were fishermen, daily wage workers and employees of the PPT and Oswal chemical and fertiliser factories, together with their families.

Sudhakar Nayak, a 32-year-old farmer from a village near Paradip, told a reporter, "When we found ourselves alive after the cyclone, we thought we were lucky. But now we think it would have been better had we died. Anything would have been better than the way

we are living now."

This situation has resulted in looting and riots by hungry and homeless victims of the storm, angered by the failure of the authorities to provide timely and adequate relief. Along the 40-kilometre highway between Cuttack, the second largest city in the state, and Chandikhol, every passing vehicle was forcibly stopped by villagers, who set up makeshift road blockades and took all food supplies. Along the highway leading to Paradip thousands of villagers were reported to be stopping passing vehicles, pleading for food and drinking water.

On November 1 in Paradip a helicopter carrying Defence Minister George Fernandes, Tribal Affairs Minister Jual Oram and Minister for Mines Naveen Patnaik was attacked by angry residents protesting the lack of relief supplies, drinking water and medicine. Some shouted, "We are not here to listen to speeches. We want food and water."

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who toured Orissa on November 5, told a news conference in the state capital of Bhubaneswar: "The loss of human life and habitation is unimaginable. The rehabilitation of the people in the cyclone-hit areas will be a gigantic task." He announced a grant of \$23 million for immediate release from the National Calamity Relief Fund, in addition to an earlier \$23 million.

In an attempt to appease the affected people he said: "I wish to assure the cyclone-affected people that whatever will be required will be provided by us for relief operations. Money will not stand in the way." The leader of the opposition Congress (I), Sonia Gandhi, met Prime Minister Vajpayee on November 2. She called for the Orissa cyclone to be declared "a national calamity of rare severity" and requested assistance from the central government to the Congress state government in Orissa.

Central and state authorities seem to be most interested in putting down riots by starving survivors. "The biggest challenge now is to deal with increasing instances of lawlessness and vandalism," said the revenue minister in Orissa, Jagganath Patnaik. Bijay Mahapatra of the BJD declared, "There is a total breakdown of the law and order machinery and only the armed forces can help to overcome the situation." The BJP-led central government is sending more army troops to Orissa.

The devastation caused by the cyclone and the government's woefully inadequate response have raised serious political questions. The *Hindustan Times* on November 2 stated in an editorial: "The full extent of the havoc caused by the cyclone in Orissa will not be known for some time, but what is already evident is the total unpreparedness of both the state and central governments for the disaster. What is unpardonable is that it was not something which could have caught the authorities by surprise, like an earthquake."

The *Times of India* placed the blame for the massive death toll on "constraining socio-economic circumstances" in India, and decried weak logistical coordination and poor communications, which have hampered rescue operations.

The cyclone had been predicted by meteorological authorities and warnings had been issued a few days prior to its onset. Some authorities are trying to attribute the human disaster to the "ignorance" of the local population. The above-quoted *Hindustan Times* editorial pointed to the "curious reluctance" of the people "to move to safer places inland".

In fact, for the human cost of the cyclone to have been limited, a full-scale evacuation of millions of people would have had to have been organised. A properly coordinated plan of action was required, to provide the necessary transport, alternative accommodation, food, water, sanitation and other essentials. But the capitalist ruling class in India is neither able nor willing to mobilise the required resources. Above all, the human catastrophe resulting from the cyclone underscores the terrible conditions of poverty and backwardness which prevail after more than 50 years of Indian independence under bourgeois rule.



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