

Hundreds killed by floods in India, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh

Vilani Peris
12 August 2000

A new wave of floods has killed hundreds of people in the Indian states of Himachal Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal and Bihar as well as neighboring south Asian countries, for the second time this year. While the floods have wreaked havoc, destroying countless homes and exposing millions of people to famine and disease, India's Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led government has again demonstrated its callous disregard for the fate of masses of ordinary people.

According to reports on August 10, more than 300 people have been killed and over five million made homeless in the north and northeast of India, as well as in Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. But these figures, which are regarded as conservative, are expected to increase as ongoing rain worsens flooding in coming days.

The disaster has been attributed to monsoon rains, although some experts claim that the flooding, which is increasing each year, could be caused by global warming. Despite this growing problem the Indian government and its neighbours have made no attempt to develop programs that would prevent millions becoming victims.

Dozens of bodies were found on July 31 in the Sutlej River in Himachal Pradesh, which borders Tibet. Large numbers were reported missing, according to official announcements, as the river submerged 200 square kilometres, the water level rising 50 feet in some places. Thousands of houses disappeared and roads, railways, telephone lines and water supplies were completely destroyed. Seventeen large and fifty small bridges and four power stations were washed away in the deluge. Distress is widespread throughout the state due to the lack of food and other essential items destroyed in the floods.

While the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh, Prem

Kumar Dhumal, declared that the flood damage was serious, his main concern was not for the affected population but the state's apple and tourist industries. Dhumal ordered authorities to clear the roads so that apples could be transported to planes for export. And where roads were damaged, he declared that the "state government will deploy workers to carry them on foot to the airplanes".

The Himachal Pradesh state government, which has estimated flood damage at 25 billion rupees (\$US582 million), said it was expecting 5 billion rupees (\$US112 million) aid from the central government but had only received one billion.

Flooding of the Brahmaputra River in northeastern Assam has also caused massive damage with approximately 80 people reported dead, 2.5 million houses damaged and 3.2 million people displaced so far. Assam health ministry official told the press that encephalitis, dysentery and malaria were rapidly spreading throughout that state, with more than 35 killed by these diseases so far.

Those affected by the floods in Assam were not provided food or medicine during the first week. One victim, Phani Das told the *AFP* news service: "We are surviving on coconut water and a few grains of puffed rice, which we managed to carry with us after flood waters engulfed our village on Thursday [August 4]."

Monimola Das, a mother of three, said: "We are virtually starving with no relief coming in from the government". Another villager, Rini Kalita said he did not have a way to take his two children, who have diarrhea, to the hospital.

Assam's Food Control Minister Promode Gogoi admitted to *AFP* that the government could not provide relief to all flood victims: "We are trying our best to provide help to them all but it is physically impossible

to reach all the affected villages”. The Assam state government has asked the central government for 200 million rupees in aid but only received 50 million.

In poverty-stricken Bihar, more than 20 people were killed and 16 districts affected. The floods hit the drought-devastated state in early July affecting 25 districts and 2 million people. It is estimated that crops worth about 84 million rupees were destroyed with 3,000 houses washed away.

Arunchal Pradesh state, which saw 10 people killed and 20,000 homes destroyed by flooding in early June, has been submerged again by the latest deluge. West Bengal, which reported five dead and 5,000 houses ruined in July, has also been hard hit by current flooding. According to official reports from Uttar Pradesh, 26 people have been killed in mud and rock landslides precipitated by the swollen Bahavra River.

The Indian sub-continent is regularly hit by devastating disasters. In October last year, a savage storm swept India's eastern coastal state of Orissa leaving 30,000 dead and millions of people still suffering the resulting health hazards and damage. In May this year, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Indian states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, West Bengal and Andra Pradesh saw over 50 million people affected by a severe drought. In 1996 three villages were destroyed and flooding in the Kinnar district, Himachal Pradesh state, killed 200 people. These are just a few in the long list of tragedies.

As with previous ruling regimes in India, the present state governments and the BJP-led central government have not instituted any programs to prevent or respond to these catastrophes. Even after the tragedies have occurred, the central government has refused to allocate adequate funds to the affected areas. In fact, this year the Indian government has diverted funds away from welfare programs for the poor and boosted defense spending by a hefty 27 percent.

BJP leaders in the northeastern Indian states have also attempted to divert attention from their refusal to develop flood prevention and relief programs by blaming neighboring China. Government officials have claimed that landslides in Tibet, which is controlled by China, caused the floods. Environmentalists, however, have demonstrated that the main source for the flooding is unplanned forest clearing in India and elsewhere in South Asia, which has led to large-scale erosion of soil

and filled riverbeds.

World Disasters Report 2000, which is published by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, said: “Reckless human use of fossil fuel, overwhelmingly by industrialised countries, has helped raise the spectre of climate change which darkens everyone's horizon.” The report also points out that 96 percent of all deaths from natural disasters occur in developing countries.

A recent Oxfam Institute survey reports that every year in India 56 million people are affected by so-called natural disasters, 11 percent of the land is flooded, 28 percent of the country faces drought, half the country is hit by earthquakes and 4,700 miles of seashore is prone to cyclone damage.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact