Hundreds die in floods in southern India and Bangladesh

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Serious loss of life and property have been reported in Andhra Pradesh and Kerala in southern India and also in Bangladesh as a result of heavy floods and landslides caused by the monsoon at the end of August. The Indian floods, which are among the worst on record, have sparked accusations that the state and central governments have done nothing to alleviate the impact of these annual disasters.

According to official figures, 162 have died in Andhra Pradesh and 119 in Kerala. About three million people have been affected by floods. The lack of food and medicine for the victims are likely to lead to further deaths. Government reports indicate that Andhra Pradesh has received its highest monsoon rainfall in 50 years and that the state is still in endangered by rising water levels in the Godavari River.

In June more than 300 people died by floods in northeastern India, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Since then epidemics of malaria, cholera and diarrhea have taken hundreds more lives in the worst affected area, the state of Assam.

In Bangladesh, coastal areas and some offshore islands have been severely affected by floods as well as violent storms. Floods on Sandwip Island have forced the evacuation of 12,000 people. Floods have destroyed most dwellings on Urirchar Island and 60 fishermen are still missing as a result of storms. There is no drinking water because wells and water supplies have been flooded by seawater.

In a media statement on August 30, Kerala Chief Minister E.K. Nayanar reported that 11,800 homes had been destroyed by floods in his state and 55,578 people forced to take shelter in centres opened by the government. “We are worried as the rains have picked up this week,” he said.

Nayanar subsequently wrote to Prime Minister Vajpayee demanding one billion rupees from the central government for flood relief. He explained that the floods had “resulted in the massive loss of the houses of fishermen, fishing equipment, coastal roads and structures in coastal areas, coconut plantations and the erosion of hundreds of hectares of land.” He complained that Kerala had received no money for earlier floods in June.

In Andhra Pradesh, it was reported that by August 30 the floods have affected 3,080 villages and towns and submerged 177,987 hectares of farmland, causing damage officially estimated at 7.7 billion rupees. The real destruction far exceeds these figures. Several parts of the state capital Hyderabad, also known as “Cyberabad” because of its burgeoning information technology industries, have been submerged by floods, causing major damage to infrastructure such as roads and drains.

Authorities in Hyderabad have been accused exacerbating the floods by allowing the construction of dwellings in beds of tanks (water reservoirs) designed to take floodwaters. Dr. Narasimha Reddy from the Centre for Resource Education told the *Hindustan Times*: “Earlier rulers had created a chain of lakes, reservoirs and tanks with surplus water flowing from the one to the other without flooding the landscape. However most of the tanks and lakes have vanished.”

The lakes and tanks were build after the city was devastated in 1908 by floods that claimed 30,000 lives. But the failure of governments to provide low cost public housing has forced many of the poor to build shelters in the beds of these reservoirs. The construction of a 3.5-kilometre road cutting across part of one of the major lakes directly resulted in the inundation of a number of neighbourhoods.

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu

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attempted to use the flooding for his own political purposes citing it as a reason why opposition parties should call off their protests over the police killing of four people during a demonstration on August 27 over rising electricity tariffs. The deaths provoked a widespread strike that shut shops and other businesses and paralysed bus and train services. “These incidents will hit the image of the State as an investor friendly destination,” Naidu said, revealing his lack of concern for the victims of the floods.

Natural disasters such as floods, cyclones and droughts are a common occurrence in India. In Andhra Pradesh itself, a cyclone in the Eastern Godavari district killed 2,000 people in 1996 and another in 1997 claimed about 10,000 lives. In 1998 floods in the state caused 150 deaths.

Last October the coastal areas of the eastern Indian state of Orissa were hit by a huge cyclone killing about 30,000 people. By May this year about 50 million people were affected by a severe drought Gujarat, Rajasthan, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh itself as well as the neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Yet despite the regularity of such disasters governments not only provide inadequate relief assistance to the victims, who are invariably from the poorest layers of society, but fail to take the most elementary precautionary measures. In Hyderabad even the previous steps taken to minimise the impact of flooding have been undermined by the lacking of planning and the domination of profit over the basic needs of ordinary working people.

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