Millions of flood victims in India desperate for food, clean water and medicine

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Food riots erupted last week in flood-affected areas of West Bengal as millions of people have been left homeless by the worst floods in 22 years. Many lack food, clean water, shelter and basic medicines as the central Indian government quarrels over who should provide aid. Clashes have also been reported in the flood-affected state of Bihar.

Hundreds of angry people demanding food at Ranaghat, 80 kilometres from Calcutta, surrounded the district administration and tried to force their way into the office. They only left after rations were distributed. At Nadia, 150 kilometres north of Calcutta, police fired on a crowd desperate for food.

Railway officers have reported that in some areas people have looted trains carrying food and occupied others, cooking and sleeping inside the carriages. The lack of boats has also resulted in clashes with police and troops involved in rescue operations as people attempt to scramble aboard the limited vessels available.

In West Bengal, an estimated 17 million people have been rendered homeless and more than five million are marooned in villages and towns surrounded by vast lakes of water. The official death toll had risen to 906 by Monday but the real figure is believed to be in the thousands. Nearly 100 people are still missing, feared dead.

The Ganges and 56 other rivers deluged a large portion of West Bengal and 11 districts in the western parts of neighbouring Bangladesh. The flooding has continued since September 18 when heavy and continuous monsoonal rains caused river banks and dams to overflow, submerging some areas of land by up to three metres of water.

Low lying areas of Calcutta, the capital of West Bengal and India's second most populous city, were inundated, turning streets into torrents and forcing 55,000 people out of their homes. According to one relief worker, “There was nowhere to store the dead bodies, some of which are simply being thrown into the water.”

While the floods have begun to subside in areas of West Bengal, a quarter of neighbouring Bangladesh is now under water. At least 70 people are dead and nearly 350 are missing. More than one million have been made homeless.

The flood victims face the danger of epidemics of cholera, dysentery, malaria and other diseases. In rural areas, the water is polluted with the decaying carcasses of cattle and other animals. One relief coordinator estimated that one million people could be suffering from gastric diseases. Doctors have already reported numerous cases of fever, skin infection and stomach ailments. According to one official, 20 people have already died of water-borne diseases.

“The situation is such that we cannot even claim to return to normal soon. Communication and infrastructure have totally collapsed. We are entirely dependent on the government for help,” one official said. One estimate put the damage to houses at 2.8 billion rupees ($US65 million) and crop losses at 30 billion rupees. About 10,000 cattle have perished.

Grant Cassidy, a World Vision spokesman, told CNN that people feel that nobody cares about them. “People are completely shocked... You see people's faces... They are devastated.” One Bengali villager told an interviewer: “Nobody has reached our village to help us. People are dying of snake bites.” He had just eaten his first meal in seven days. “Women and children in our village are still waiting for food. The government is doing nothing,” he said.

The central government, led by the right-wing

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Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), and the West Bengal state government dominated by the Stalinist Community Party of India (Marxist)—CPI (M)—which are currently engaged in a bitter political tussle, have both used the floods to blame the other.

The BJP is accusing the state government of not handling funds properly and has provided little in the way of flood relief. The CPI-M is calling on the central government to provide 9.62 billion rupees ($US209 million), less than one third of the estimated damage to infrastructure. West Bengal chief minister Joyti Basu has insisted that the central government declare the flood a “national disaster” but has not received any response.

Even though floods regularly hit West Bengal, few preventative measures have been taken. An expert committee set up after last year's floods recommended that all rivers in the state be dredged to counteract silting. The state irrigation department secretary has admitted that if the recommendations had been implemented the impact of the present flooding would have been lessened. But neither the central nor the state government was prepared to provide the five billion rupees needed to carry out the work.

The West Bengal floods are just the latest in a long line of tragic disasters, which have repeatedly devastated the Indian subcontinent. In late 1999, 30,000 people died when a cyclone hit Orissa in eastern India. In the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan in western India and Andra Pradesh in southern India, millions were affected by a severe drought in May.

In each case the lack of planning and preventative measures, and poorly equipped and financed relief operations, have compounded the number of deaths and the destruction of property. While billions of rupees are spent at the state and national levels on infrastructure and incentives to attract investors, very little money is available to lessen the impact of floods, droughts and other so-called natural disasters.

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