

# Worst flood in eastern Indian state for 50 years

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At least 90 people are dead and an estimated 8 million have been displaced in the heaviest flooding for 50 years in the eastern Indian state of Orissa. Twenty-four of the state's 30 districts have been affected. The same areas had yet to recover from a devastating cyclone less than two years ago that claimed over 10,000 lives.

According to officials, vast tracts of water have cut off more than 8,000 villages and several towns. Many highways have been washed away. A number of railway stations and sections of track have been submerged. Some 600,000 people have been evacuated but many more are dependent on sporadic relief supplies for survival.

In the severely affected Jagatsinghpur district, villagers perched on embankments were seen jostling to grab pouches dropped from military helicopters. Many elderly people left empty-handed. "It seems people are in a state of panic and insecurity. Food sacks are like a manna from heaven for them," Air Marshal S.G. Imandar, head of India's Eastern Air Command, told *Reuters*.

For many villagers sheltering on high ground under plastic sheets their lives had been devastated. According to official estimates, the flooding has damaged 174,000 houses. At least 710,000 hectares of crops have been destroyed, affecting the livelihood of more than 4 million people.

Officials fear the death toll will rise as a result of water-borne diseases. Water and sanitation have been badly hit in 10,000 villages and health services are in chaos due to flood damage to 235 health centres. Madanmonhan Pradhan, a senior government doctor, said: "Up to 1,918 cases of diarrhea and dysentery have been reported. We are expecting an increase in the coming days." According to state health minister Debi

Mishra, at least 3,000 people have been stricken with severe diarrhea and 12 people have died. Outbreaks of jaundice and gastro-enteritis have also taken place.

Unusually heavy monsoon rains have caused the flooding. Orissa was deluged with 82 centimetres or nearly a metre of rain between June 1 and July 18—double the normal level. Both the state's two main rivers—the Mahanadi and Brahmani—as well as their tributaries have swollen into raging torrents. The situation has been compounded by high tides in the Bay of Bengal, blocking the release of water into the sea.

The most devastating flooding has been caused, however, by the release of water from the Hirakud dam, situated about 300 km upstate. Heavy rain in Orissa and the neighbouring state of Chattisgarh rapidly filled the dam, forcing authorities last week to open 51 of the 64 sluice gates to prevent water from spilling over. According to one official, the earthen dam was simply not high enough and only had the capacity to cope with about one third of the run-off.

Both the state and central governments have been involved in providing relief to the flood victims. According to the state's Chief Secretary Devi Prasad Bagchi, several hundred army personnel have been pressed into service to distribute relief supplies and assist in rescue operations. The number of troops simply does not match the scale of the disaster and more help has been requested.

Nitish Kumar, India's agriculture minister, led a team to survey the affected areas on July 19. "It's a bad situation," he later admitted. But the central government has promised to provide just \$US22 million for relief works—an average of less than \$3 a head for the estimated 8 million affected.

Indian and Spanish Red Cross officials have also been involved. "The focus of our relief effort is the

western and coastal areas. So far we have managed to reach over 36,000 people, providing shelter material, dry food rations and clothing,” International Red Cross official Patrick Fuller explained. “The situation has got steadily worse and the future looks fairly bleak ... We are seeing very high tides which are preventing river water passing into the sea.”

Many villagers were critical of the lack of warning and inadequate assistance from government authorities. “What relief? I have not seen anything reaching us since the past four days,” complained Sarat Samal, who has been living on a highway near his now submerged village of Narendrapur.

The *Times of India* commented: “The plight of such a vast number of people for the last two weeks has raised questions on the efficiency of the government in tackling floods.” The newspaper noted that the damage was worse than the 1982 flood, despite the fact that the previous water peaks were higher. “In this background, the claims about rescue and relief operations made by the government daily at its official briefings are viewed here as nothing but ‘statistical jugglery’.”

The limitations of the relief operations point to broader problems. While this year’s monsoons in Orissa and surrounding states are unusually heavy, many parts of India confront the danger of flooding every year with potentially devastating consequences for millions of people. Yet under the profit system, the money for the necessary flood prevention, including adequate dams and levees, warning systems and emergency relief is simply unavailable.



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