

Northern Nigeria hit by floods

Trevor Johnson
5 October 2001

Two hundred people have died and tens of thousands have been made homeless as a result of devastating floods in northern Nigeria. Twenty people died after floods hit the state of Kano, according to the Nigerian Red Cross. A further 48,500 have been displaced. In neighbouring Jigawa, 180 deaths were registered, 800 people were injured and 35,500 displaced. The total number of people affected, including those whose farmlands were washed away, exceeds 143,000.

The latest victims of the flooding include 11 pupils of the Islamiya school in Kano. The pupils died on Wednesday last week when the wall of their school collapsed after being weakened by heavy overnight rain. Witnesses said that 10 of the dead pupils were girls between five and 10-years-old. All 11 were killed instantly and seven others were rushed to hospital with serious injuries.

Displaced people have fled to makeshift refugee camps in schools, mosques and other public buildings. Many have lost everything except the clothes they were wearing. The Kano State government has dispatched mobile clinics to the worst hit areas. But the fear now is of an epidemic spreading, as many bodies remain in the water. Reporters describe conditions in the camps in the Wudil district of Kano State as deplorable. More than 3,000 refugees were huddled together in one school in the upland area of Tila.

The floods followed torrential rain that has fallen since August, causing rivers to overflow and dams to collapse. Sixty villages were submerged, destroying farmland, livestock and agricultural produce estimated to be worth millions of naira, when the Kano river dam was opened after the water level became dangerously high. Much of the grain consumed in Kano and other parts of the northwest is produced in the areas worst hit by the floods, meaning the disaster is far from over for the people of the region.

Officials claim they gave warnings over the radio that

the dam was about to be opened three days before the disaster. But no efforts were made to evacuate the population. Excess water has to be released from the behind dams every year because they are not able to cope with the regular flood levels.

This is not the first time that flooding of this kind has happened. In fact, it has become an almost annual occurrence. In 1988, flooding in Kano State displaced more than 300,000 people. In 1999 and last year, more than 200,000 people were displaced by flooding in Niger State, where it is believed that about a million people living in the low-lying plains of the Niger River are at risk.

Flooding is recorded every year in all the states along the Niger and its tributaries. In the lower Niger basin, these floods frequently cause disasters. Two-thirds of Bayelsa State and half of Delta State are inundated by devastating floods for at least a quarter of the year. In the districts buried under water, schools and markets are suspended for weeks.

Yet the local, regional and federal governments appear to have taken no precautions. They have allowed the infrastructure of this oil-rich country to disintegrate to the point where lives are regularly threatened by flooding.

The Islamiya school collapse is the most poignant example of this situation. It was made of mud brick, the traditional building material of the area, and had not been replaced by a modern flood resistant structure, although it was in a flood-prone part of the city. It was the only school building in the entire district.

The dams that control the Niger river system, as well as providing power and water, are not adequate for the task and have become a threat to the safety of the population. The vast natural resources of the African continent are being plundered for the benefit of a tiny elite, which has no interest in investing in infrastructure projects that could improve the lives of ordinary

Africans.

Across the globe the same pattern is repeated. Studies show that more than two billion people, representing one-third of the world's population, have been subjected to natural disasters in the last decade, with floods and droughts accounting for 86 percent of all such catastrophes. The studies indicate that although earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and landslides may be more dramatic, and take a very high toll on human lives, floods have longer lasting and more far-reaching effects on the health of ordinary people.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact