

Death toll mounts as floods devastate Algiers

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A 36-hour deluge over last weekend has claimed the lives of at least 650 people and made thousands more homeless around the Algerian capital, Algiers. Three quarters of the dead are from Algiers itself, with fully half from the working class district of Bab el Oued.

Continuing rain is hampering the rescue operation, and many bodies are still buried under mounds of rubble and mud. Bodies are also being washed up on beaches around Algiers. Rescuers expect the death toll to top 1,000.

The initial downpour on Friday caused the majority of the damage. Despite only 99 millimetres of rain falling, a four-metre torrent of water swept all before it, washing away cars, trees and electricity pylons. The ensuing chaos on the roads caused many crashes, which account for a significant number of deaths.

Bab el Oued was worst hit, as water and tonnes of mud streamed down an adjoining hill—swamping the area. Matters were severely compounded by the criminal negligence and indifference of the Algerian government, who had blocked off drains in Bab el Oued and other working class districts four years ago, which prevented flood-water from draining away.

Under the pretext of the drainage system being used by militants from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) as escape routes following bombing raids, the government poured concrete into the drainage system that was laid out by the French prior to independence in 1962. Despite the GIA being largely forced out of the city, and in the face of warnings of potential disaster, the government refused to unblock the drainage system.

Algeria's usually docile press has been filled with condemnation of the government, charging "desertion of duty" and "criminal negligence" due to its failure to warn the population or take adequate preventative measures, despite receiving clear weather warnings. *Le Matin* observed, "The floods laid bare the absence of political courage", adding, "The men leading us don't

even know how to react to a weather bulletin".

The government has come under criticism also for the inadequate help it has given to the rescue operation, as makeshift morgues and hospital emergency rooms were quickly overwhelmed. There are no sniffer-dogs available to seek out survivors, and as the government has provided no picks or shovels, volunteer rescuers have resorted to using saucepans and plates to dig away the rubble. *Jeune Independent* criticised the government as "leaders who do not care whether a citizen dies from natural catastrophes, terrorism or other calamities". Bab el Oued is still largely cut off by a wall of mud and many roads remain impassable—further hampering the rescue, with meteorologists warning of more rain on the way.

President Bouteflika briefly visited Bab el Oued on Sunday, but was met by angry residents complaining of appalling living conditions and the government's inadequate response to the crisis. A spontaneous demonstration erupted with youth shouting "Government Assassins!", forcing Bouteflika to be hurriedly removed by his minders. A group of several hundred youth, apparently sympathetic to Islamic fundamentalism, then marched towards government headquarters before being headed-off by police and security forces. Warning shots were fired, but it was only a new downpour that cleared the demonstration. Government buildings remain under the protection of the army, who are now also stationed in Bab el Oued to counter an almost continuous anti-government demonstration.

The Algerian press is full of warnings to the government about the dangers inherent in the current situation. The influential *El Watan* warned, "Divorce has been definitively consummated between the governors... and [the] people". *Oran* noted, "With the city becoming a cemetery, the last dyke which maintained the pretence of a link between the state and

the people is perhaps sundered”.

In response, the government called an emergency cabinet meeting on Sunday, which announced a three-day period of national mourning, and approved compensation figures of around \$300 for each homeless family, and around \$2,600 for each family who has lost a relative. It has appealed to foreign governments and aid agencies for financial assistance. Neighbouring Morocco and the former colonial master, France, have been the first to respond, whilst the International Red Cross has launched an appeal estimating that as many as 24,000 people could be displaced or left without shelter.

The Algerian government has recently offered its services to the US war-drive, claiming to be an expert in fighting Islamic fundamentalism. In the ongoing civil war in Algeria, which has claimed around 150,000 lives, the government feels it has honed its skills in rooting out terrorists. There have been widespread claims that the terrorist organisations were heavily infiltrated by the military regime, and that the civil war was stoked up to divert social and political opposition away from the regime. In return for collaboration in the “war against terrorism”, Bouteflika has appealed for US and western military aid. Just how desperate is Bouteflika’s need for western support was revealed in the almost universal hatred for the regime shown in the flood disaster.



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