

Heat and poverty kill over 700 people in India

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A severe heat wave in India has killed at least 734 people over the past fortnight—666 of them in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. Most of the victims were poor—small farmers, elderly people, rickshaw pullers and street vendors—who succumbed to heatstroke and dehydration in temperatures that reached 49 degrees Celsius.

The worst affected areas were the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh. According to the state's Relief Commissioner D.C. Rosaiah, the official death toll by May 16 was 109 in West Godavari, 101 in Krishna district and another 98 in Guntur. In other coastal districts, Prakasam had 77 deaths, East Godavari 61, and Visakhapatnam 39.

In the neighbouring state of Orissa, at least 37 have died. In Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, 18 and four people died respectively. In central and southern Pakistan up to 40 deaths were reported.

India's Meteorological Department reported that May has been abnormally hot in southern India, with dry winds blowing from the country's northwestern deserts much earlier than usual. The winds, which have been caused by a low-pressure system in the Bay of Bengal, have been strong in some areas. In Madras, trees were uprooted and houses and power lines badly damaged.

In Andhra Pradesh, temperatures were 7 percent higher than the May average. New Delhi, Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, and other parts of northern India also face severe heat. Hyderabad Meteorological Centre Director Dr. C.V.V. Bhadram explained: "There were heat waves in 1996 and 1998, but this year it is unusually long."

For those forced to work in the open, such as farmers and labourers, the heat has been intolerable. Bheemudu, a 44-year-old rickshaw puller in Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh, told the media: "When the hot wind hit my face, I felt as if I was set on fire. I couldn't work for four days. It was very difficult to survive without

working. Even the nights were unbearably hot."

In the state capital of Hyderabad, Ramanna, a rickshaw puller described his desperate situation: "We work under the hot sun to eke out a livelihood, but this summer I was forced to remain indoors for a week to escape the fury of the sun." Bhoopal Reddy, a small businessman, said: "We tried everything to beat the heat but were unsuccessful. In temperatures of 49 degrees you can't do anything."

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu declared: "The tragedy was unparalleled in the state's history." But his administration has done virtually nothing to assist the victims or prevent further deaths. Naidu has promised to pay 50,000 rupees [about \$US1,100] to the family of every victim but many will not receive the assistance as they did not file police reports. The chief minister advised people to stay indoors and drink plenty of water until cooler weather arrives.

Such advice, however, is a cruel joke. Many workers have no choice but to work outside. Moreover, for many poor farmers, even if they had the luxury of "staying indoors," conditions inside their thatched houses are worse than outside. Usually, they and their families sleep outside to avoid the heat. Now they have no protection, and their houses are vulnerable to catching fire in the heat and high winds.

As far as drinking more water, many people in Andhra Pradesh do not have access to clean water, even in normal times. Remote villages have no system of piped water. In conditions of drought, people have to walk kilometres to fetch drinking water. Serious water shortages have been reported from Kumool, Khammam and other towns.

India has experienced similar heat waves previously. In 1998, about 800 people died during another severe heat wave in Andhra Pradesh. In the state of Bihar prolonged high temperatures killed 20 people in April

2000. Fire fighters reported more than 20 major fires in less than a week that destroyed 2,000 thatched houses as well as cattle and crops. Four children were burnt alive in their homes in the district of Samstipur and similar reports came from at least four other districts.

The state and national governments have treated the current heat wave as just another natural disaster and the hundreds of deaths as regrettable, but unpreventable. In fact, as in the case of earthquakes, floods and cyclones, elementary measures, including the provision of decent housing, clean water and free medical services, would prevent many, if not most, of these tragic deaths.

Chief Minister Naidu boasts about making the Andhra Pradesh capital of Hyderabad into a globally competitive centre for information technology. Billions of rupees have been poured into infrastructure and services aimed at attracting corporate investment to the state. At the same time, however, most people are compelled to live in conditions of abject poverty and thus vulnerable to “natural” disasters as well as disease and famine.

While rain cooled some areas of Andhra Pradesh last week, the Meteorological Department warned on Monday that high temperatures may be on the way again. The formation of another low in the Bay of Bengal threatened to send very hot winds sweeping over large areas of western and southern India.



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