

Kenya hit by floods

David Rowan
31 May 2002

Widespread flooding throughout Kenya has displaced up to 60,000 people. The official number of those killed, mainly from landslides, has so far been estimated at 50.

According to reports, a total of 175,000 people have been affected by flooding that has hit seven of Kenya's eight provinces, stretching across the country from the shores of Lake Victoria in the Nyanza Province in the West, to the Coast Province in the East.

One of the factors contributing to the flooding has been the above normal level of rainfall. The seasonal rains that affect Kenya from April to June have been unusually heavy in many parts of the country and a number of riverbanks have burst.

A BBC report stated that at least 30,000 people were forced to abandon their homes to escape the swollen Tana River in the east of the country, and described how whole villages had been washed away. One reporter saw desperate villagers stranded and surrounded by water, some pleading for the government to use helicopters to airlift people from the area and to bring in aid. They told the reporter that they felt the government would send help to them because helicopters were used to ferry cabinet ministers around, even when there were no emergencies.

There is a shortage of fresh water for drinking and cooking. Latrines and wells have been submerged and the threat of cholera and typhoid has increased. Even as some rivers began to subside, there remained a heightened danger of starvation and disease. Abbal Gullet of the Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) raised fears about the long-term impact of the floods. He was concerned over, "the food security and health of the populations whose crops have been destroyed and are now more exposed to malaria and waterborne diseases."

The Orma people, who live and raise cattle on the low-lying pastures next to the Tana River, have been badly

affected, losing their homes and livestock. Small plots belonging to subsistence farmers have also been destroyed, leaving them with little or no food.

Reports state that KRCS made an appeal on May 10 for about \$1.1 million to assist the flood victims, but had thus far received no donor pledges. The \$31,700 allocated to the KRCS from its head organisation, the International Federation of the Red Cross, had been quickly used up on aid. KRCS said there was urgent need for jerry cans, mosquito nets, medical kits and water purification tablets, as well as food to help those displaced and forced to live outdoors.

Most of the deaths have occurred on the slopes of Mount Kenya and have been caused by landslides. In one village, five members of the same family were crushed to death by a wall of mud as they slept in their home. Another landslide killed seven people in the village of Giumpu. A survivor of one of the landslides, Jamlick Kamau, described his harrowing experience. He told reporters how he, "woke up to find one room of my house had been demolished and washed downhill by mud." He then heard cries for help from the direction of his uncle's house, but when he reached it the house had been swept away.

Although the heavy rains and erratic weather patterns have been a contributing factor in the devastating floods, the situation has been exacerbated by policies pursued by the government of President Daniel Arap Moi and has created a paradoxical situation where one part of Kenya can be devastated by floods and the other by drought.

Over the past few years the government of Kenya has been embroiled in controversy over deforestation of the country. In 1998 the government authorised the destruction of forests around Mount Kenya, which lies 200 kilometres northeast of the capital Nairobi. The government pushed forward its programme, despite the concerns of environmental groups who warned that the

widespread deforestation was leading to drought and desertification in some parts of the country and in other parts to flooding, due to the destruction of natural water catchment areas.

In 1999 alone, selective logging cleared 200,000 hectares of forest. The Kenya Forest Working Group issued a statement, noting that in comparison only 160,000 acres of forest had been cleared between 1963 and the late 1990s, indicating a huge increase in deforestation for commercial reasons.

In 2001 the government authorised the clearing of a further 167,000 hectares of forest in the Mount Kenya, Rift Valley and Western Kenya areas. Government land was bought at the cheapest rates possible and then sold on to land developers at exorbitant prices. Large tracts of the land were handed out to government supporters. The government also attempted to give the forest clearances a populist gloss, downplaying the fact that peasants had been forced off their ancestral land and into squatter settlements by corporate developers. Using the language of “land reform”, the government claimed that the cleared land would be allocated to landless peasants. A spokesperson for the East African Wildlife organisation refuted this: “In many cases in the past excised forest land has been allocated to people who are not landless or squatters.”

The Action for Endangered Species organisation has stripped Kenya of the global conservation award it was given in 2001. However the responsibility for the destruction of forests, now estimated to average 3,000 hectares per year, does not just lie with the corrupt Kenyan regime. Behind the government’s policy is the pressure to earn hard currency to pay off debts to Western banks. One quarter of Kenya’s annual exports are paid in debt servicing, four times the amount Kenya receives in donor aid. The floods show just one of the ways in which this indebtedness is taking a cruel toll in human life.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact