

Floods ravage China, worse feared to come

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After more than six weeks of torrential rainfall, millions of Chinese are at risk from severe flooding during this year's wet season, which officially began this month. More than 596 people have already drowned or died in landslides or building collapses, and some 300 people are still reported as missing. On July 6, eight people were killed when a wall they were sheltering behind collapsed in a market place in central Hunan province. The water level of major rivers and lakes is already so high that experts are warning of even more catastrophic floods than those of 1998, which claimed over 4,000 lives.

Early rains throughout June ravaged a swath of China, from the far western province of Xinjiang, to Shaanxi, Sichuan and Guizhou provinces in the west, to the densely populated agricultural provinces of Hunan, Hubei and Jiangxi in the central region, and the major industrial province of Fujian on the east coast. Nineteen of China's 32 provinces have been affected to some degree.

According to official estimates, the rains in June flooded over 4.97 million hectares of farmland, affected 110 million people and caused over 26 billion yuan (\$US3 billion) in damage. During the height of the storms, the Huangpu and Suzhou rivers near Shanghai, China's major commercial centre, rose above warning marks. Floodgates had to be closed to keep the water out of the central business district. Last week, typhoon Rammasun brought more torrential downpours to the area, putting at risk over 40,000 homes in the older western section of the city.

In Shaanxi by mid-June, flooding had killed over 200 people, with 266 more missing. Some 83,000 buildings were damaged and 110,000 people forced to evacuate. Thorir Gudmundsson, a Red Cross worker, reported from the province on the impact of a storm that dumped 489 millimetres in just one day on the county of Foping:

“[E]ntire villages have been washed away by raging torrents and devastating landslides that lasted just one frightful night but that will never be forgotten by those who survived it... Along with the houses, hundreds of people were taken away by what is so aptly termed a flash flood. In the beautiful Qin Ling mountains in southern Shaanxi, one whole factory was swept away on the night of June 8 with 20 workers inside.

“Among 132 people confirmed dead in that one valley were 17 entire families. The fields are mostly gone, along with homes and all belongings. Those who survived, did so by running for their lives up steep mountain slopes. Now they are in need of food, clothing, blankets and better shelter... The fragile rice paddies that have disappeared will not be rehabilitated for at least two or three years; in the interim, villagers will be growing vegetables for their survival.”

The state *Xinhua* newsagency reported that in Xinjiang province “561,800 people have been affected with 87,700 homes collapsed and 185,800 in need of repair”. The agency also reported that wheat and corn seeds on about 16,230 hectares of farmland had rotted. Relief work was hampered because railway lines and roads were destroyed by landslides. In Guangxi province in southern China, officials reported that 20,000 houses collapsed, two medium-sized and 82 small reservoirs were damaged, and 175,000 hectares of farmland was flooded.

China has appealed for international assistance to deal with the flooding, but the response of both of the Chinese and international authorities for aid has been negligible considering the extent of the damage. The Red Cross received just 34 million yuan (\$US4.1 million) in financial and material donations. In Xinjiang province, the government has allocated only three million yuan (\$US361,400) to the disaster relief and found temporary shelter for 70,000 people. In the southwestern province of Sichuan, the central

government allocated five million yuan (\$US600,000) and the provincial government 13 million yuan (\$US1.57 million) to relief funds.

The central government is expressing concern about possible massive flooding over the coming weeks. The wet season traditionally runs from July through to September and the level of the Yangtze river is already higher now than in the same period four years ago. Yang Zengwu, the general secretary of the Hunan provincial committee of the Communist Party of China, has called for flood prevention work to be the major priority of regional governments.

However, such declarations cannot conceal the fact the loss of life and the severity of the flooding—as in 1998—is largely due to the Beijing regime's undermining of China's natural defences against flooding and the neglect or poor construction of man-made defences.

Dongting Lake, one of the major catchment areas of the Yangtze and a natural defense against flooding, is currently just one centimetre below its 32-metre flood warning mark. So much of the lake has silted up or been reclaimed for residential, agricultural or industrial use that it now floods every five years, compared with every 41 years a century ago. This year's torrential rains make widespread dislocation inevitable in the Dongting region.

The large loss of life in the mountainous northwestern areas of Shaanxi was mainly due to deforestation, which allowed uncontrollable water runoff and triggered massive mudslides. In various areas, poorly built dykes and reservoirs have collapsed. In the city of Chongqing, a self-governing municipality in Sichuan province, a garbage dump that had been permitted on the side of a hill gave way during heavy rain and buried a factory complex. Ten workers lost their lives.

While Beijing claims that since 1998 it has spent \$US12 billion on flood prevention such as strengthening the dykes and embankments along the Yangtze river, its officials are resorting to calling on people to prepare for the worst. The predominantly rural regions that are expected to suffer are already gripped with discontent over mass unemployment, declining living standards, excessive rates of taxation and official corruption. Another year of widespread flooding will only heighten mounting hostility to a regime incapable of addressing any of these social

problems.



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