

More than one million people hit by Indian flooding

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Early monsoonal rains have caused devastating floods in a number of areas of India over the past month. More than one million people have been affected—many have been cut off by floodwaters or made homeless. According to government officials, the death toll stood at 199 as of July 10. But there are fears that hunger and disease will spread among refugees who lack access to food, clean water and proper accommodation.

The worst-hit states are Assam and Bihar in the east of the country where rains have dangerously swelled the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. In Assam, around 18,000 villages have been affected by floodwaters and as many as 269 were completely submerged. Agricultural officials estimate that 150,000 hectares of paddy rice cultivation has been ruined.

The worst affected area is Dhemaji district, 465 km east of the state capital Guwahati, where at least 15,000 villages have been flooded and 550,000 people left homeless. The district has been cut off from the rest of the state for the past week and many wooden bridges and culverts have been damaged by floodwaters, disrupting road and rail transport.

Assam's Flood Control Minister Nurzamal Sarkar stated: "The flood situation has turned critical in parts of eastern Assam... in Dhemaji alone the damage was devastating, with people forced to take shelter in makeshift camps and on embankments." He said the state government had requested an immediate grant of 4 billion rupees (\$US83 billion) from the federal government but had received no response.

A local district magistrate in Dhemaji said supplies of essential goods had stopped and warned of a "crisis-like" situation in the area. "Very soon, the existing stocks would dry up and we might have to face scarcity of food unless road links are restored." State Health Minister Rupam Singh Rongkong expressed concern over the possible outbreak of waterborne diseases.

The first deaths in Assam were reported on Wednesday. Two children were swept away by surging floodwaters in Majuli, a large island in the Brahmaputra River. But the death toll in the state may rise as communications are restored. "There are virtually no communication links and

even if some people have died or drowned we would get those reports after a few days," a police officer in Dhemaji told the press.

Residents in the small riverside village of Nohira fled as the water gouged out a huge section of the embankment protecting it. Most are poor villagers with no money and nowhere to go. "We don't know how we are going to survive and have no idea where we are going to get our next meal from," Madhurima Das, a mother of three, told reporters. "The government did nothing, despite being informed several times about the danger of our village being washed away due to severe erosion of the embankment," a young man, Lalit Nath, said.

The Central Water Commission reported that the situation in Assam had eased slightly by yesterday. But the Brahmaputra River continued to flow at dangerous levels in four places and above warning levels in seven major points in the state.

The state of Bihar has also been badly affected. Officially, two people are confirmed dead but local media reports indicate that 15 have died. Most drowned while trying to flee in small boats that capsized. In the first week of July, 44,000 people in 104 villages in four districts were hit by flooding. The figure has climbed to 80,000 people this week and rain forecast in neighbouring Nepal could exacerbate flooding in the state. At least 3,000 hectares of crops have been inundated.

Other states in India's north east, including Meghalaya, Arunchal Pradesh and West Bengal have been flooded. In West Bengal, four people are dead and 11,000 homeless. There is also severe flooding in the country's west in Maharashtra and Gujarat states, where heavy monsoonal rain and floods have killed an estimated 100 people.

In Maharashtra, the death toll has risen to 90, including 61 in the worst-affected district of Thane district, 50 km from Bombay. At the end of June, lightning strikes caused by monsoonal storms killed 23 people in Pune, 160km south-east of Bombay.

According to one state official, 60,000 families have been

made homeless and rains have submerged farmlands in Maharashtra's farming districts of Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg, depriving thousands of farmers of their crops. Key rail transport links in the Thane district has been disrupted by floods and will not be restored for days. Local officials explained that the district had received over five times its normal rainfall.

Flash floods also submerged villages and marooned over 4,000 people in neighbouring state of Gujarat . At least 75 people have been killed. Most of the deaths have been due to monsoon-related accidents, including lightning strikes, building collapses and flash floods. According to the state's flood control department, "About 20,000 people have been evacuated to safer areas."

The downpours have damaged road and rail traffic and telecommunication networks in southern Gujarat. Heavy rain and winds have severely damaged the power supply. "Many districts in central and south Gujarat have had to face a power blackout as the rains accompanied by powerful winds have toppled electricity transmission towers. A lot of electricity supply lines have been snapped," officials said.

Every year India receives heavy monsoonal rains. But the lack of preventive measures makes disastrous flooding inevitable. The limited character of the government's aid and relief efforts compounds the annual loss of human life and property. The latest floods have revealed once again that authorities have inadequate evacuation plans and means for providing basic accommodation, food, clean water and medicines for thousands of refugees.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) issued a situation report on Thursday, which detailed a national meeting of relief commissioners held on May 30 to "review the state of preparedness" for the monsoon season and "gear up relief measures at the state and district levels to meet any eventuality". The National Disaster Management Control Room in New Delhi "has been monitoring the flood situation". The National Remote Sensing Agency sends regular flood maps derived from satellite data to the appropriate authorities.

In other words, the monsoon and the dangers of associated flooding are well known and monitored. In light of the fact that more than a million people have been affected, the OCHA report listing the national efforts to provide aid speaks volumes about government indifference to the plight of the victims:

Assam: One relief camp opened and relief is being distributed to affected people.

Bihar: 16 country boats deployed for search and rescue

Gujarat: 25,247 people evacuated. A crisis management group has been formed.

Maharashtra: Damage assessment in process. 1,275

families in rescue shelters. The state government is seeking financial assistance from the central government.

One media report highlighted the situation in Maharashtra "Water rushed into shanties, small row houses and shops in the Nadi Naka area, Shelar Road, Ajay Park and Gokul Nagar. The flood control tower of the municipal corporation at Nadi Naka and a police check-post were badly affected. The control tower has a wireless set but does not have any divers. It has a staff of three workers and three clerks who have two boats at their command."

An employee at the tower pointed out that the staff were not adequately prepared to look after themselves in the midst of a flood, let alone hundreds or thousands of refugees. "We ourselves were stuck on the tower as water came into the ground floor and then surged up to the second. There were many snakes and scorpions in the swirling waters and it was difficult to handle the situation. There was just no way we could rush out and help the marooned with the boats."

The limited flood prevention measures are in stark contrast to other areas of official spending. The Indian government has sharply increased military spending over the past three years and in the midst of the current tensions with rival Pakistan has gone on an arms spending spree, allocating billions of dollars for hi-tech weaponry. Billions of rupees are also provided to big business in the form of tax incentives and other assistance.

Each year, however, millions of people suffer hardship, injury and death produced by so-called natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes and drought that could either be prevented altogether or greatly reduced by timely and well-planned relief measures.



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