

Flood catastrophe in Europe

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Over the past two weeks large parts of central and eastern Europe have suffered the worst flooding to affect the region in 150 years.

Days of torrential rain, beginning on August 10, caused many European rivers to overrun their banks. Even minor rivulets were transformed into gushing streams sweeping away houses, trees and autos. According to current information, the floods have cost the lives of 100 people in Austria, Russia, Romania, the Czech Republic and Germany. Northern Italy and the capital city of Rome were also hit by torrential rain.

The largest number of victims died on the Russian Black Sea coast. In the region around Novorossisk 15 villages were completely flooded and a total of 60 people were killed.

In the eastern German city of Dresden, the Elbe reached a level of 9.40 metres—the highest ever measured—flooding the historic city centre and overrunning many unique buildings of outstanding historical interest.

The museums accommodated by these buildings were only reopened 10 years ago after extensive renovation and rebuilding. They contain priceless masterworks of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque period, as well as a large collection of paintings by Flemish and Dutch masters. The exact extent of the damage to these buildings has yet to be finalised, but volunteers were able to rescue the works of art and secure them on higher floors of the buildings. Thousands of city inhabitants helped fill and distribute sandbags in the effort to protect the city known as “Florence on the Elbe.” As water levels rose, parts of the city had to be evacuated.

Tens of thousands of houses were badly damaged in Austria. In the Czech Republic entire stretches of land were inundated and the Czech government declared a state of emergency for some regions. Some 70,000 inhabitants of the Czech capital Prague were forced to evacuate their homes as the river Vitava overran its banks. According to the government the repair of the city’s road and rail network will take months. The prime minister estimated total damage at around 4 billion euros.

Hardest hit in Germany were the states of Bavaria and Saxony. For periods of time a number of townships in both states were cut off and dependent on supplies from the air. Inhabitants of hospitals and retirement homes were shifted to safe havens and whole regions were evacuated. Along the banks of the Elbe, 100,000 were forced to spend several nights in emergency shelters or move in with relatives or friends. In

Dresden alone, 17,000 were forced to leave their homes. An official emergency alert was declared in the Saxony mountains of the Erzgebirge and in Dresden.

In Romania, 30 villages in five regions bordering Moldavia were hit by the floods. Since the beginning of August a total of eight have died in the floods in mountainous regions.

The Hungarian capital of Budapest on the Danube escaped virtually unscathed. The spokesman for Hungarian Emergency Aid, Tibor Dobson, referred to the high levels of solidarity in the population which made it possible to evacuate 2,000 people from endangered areas without serious problems. As of this writing the swollen waters of the Vitava are headed towards the Yugoslav city of Novi Sad, which may have to be evacuated.

To the west it is expected that the dykes of the Elbe will hold near the northern German city of Hamburg. But as waters recede the extent of the damage is becoming clear. New estimates of the cost of the flood catastrophe are being made every day.

The cause of the unusually heavy rainfall in Europe was a particular weather constellation. Instead of heading toward the northeast, as is usually the case, a low pressure front over England moved south. Warmed by the southern climate of the Mediterranean, the front acquired more and more water, which then hit cold air as it headed north towards the Baltic Sea and fell in torrents across broad regions. A similar climatic constellation, a so-called 5-B front, was responsible for the flooding that struck large areas of eastern Germany and Poland in the summer of 1997.

It is evident that following the disaster of 1997 the governments of the countries affected failed to make adequate preparations for a repeat situation; nor was any effective coordination between the different European countries established.

Much has been written in recent days on the consequences of global warming. As temperatures rise, increased volumes of water are condensed, leading to heavier and heavier rainfall. On a global scale, such trends are indisputable and demonstrate that existing institutions are unable to develop a worldwide strategy to protect the natural foundations of modern life.

A number of other factors played an important role, firstly, the artificial straightening of rivers. Another factor is the risky construction of buildings on former river meadows, which hinders the natural distribution and seepage of large amounts of

water. All of these conditions point to indifference on the part of those politically responsible for the protection of the general population.

German weatherman Jörg Kachelmann, who runs his own private weather forecasting company, has for some years accused the German state weather agency of inadequately predicting such catastrophes. The recent heavy rainfalls were already evident on August 11, but emergency services only went into action a day later, when several areas were already under water. In the first stage of the crisis, those affected had to fend for themselves and watch as their houses and apartments fell victim to rising water levels.

The head economist of the German Allianz company, Klaus Friedrich, estimated flood water damage in Germany at 15 billion euros, and according to the economics ministry and insurance agencies, between 80 and 90 percent of this sum is not covered by insurance policies.

In the states of Brandenburg and Saxony small and middle-sized businesses, established during the decade since the collapse of East Germany, have been severely affected. Most such businesses have been struggling to survive over the past two years. In Saxony it is estimated that between 5,000 and 10,000 such businesses have suffered damage ranging between 100,000 and 200,000 euros. In an interview with the *Financial Times* of Germany on August 20 the president of the East German Savings and Giro association, Rainer Voigt, stated, "We have to check every individual case and see if a further extension of credit is justified."

Uwe Neumann from the Chamber of Industry and Commerce in Dresden commented, "A large number of small companies are threatened with ruin.... They all have huge credits running. Many have only begun to repay debt over the past two or three years."

"Retail traders have been especially hard hit," reported the Berlin *Tagesspiegel* in its online edition. Eberhard Lucas from the Trade Association of Saxony estimated that 10,000 such businesses had been affected by the floods. He said, "There are towns where it is no longer possible to go shopping. There is no longer any retail trade." Hotel trade groups are speaking of a threat to their existence. Most houses were not covered by insurance.

For its part, the German farmers association has reported a catastrophic loss of crops and announced higher prices.

Only a few weeks before German national elections, the current chancellor, Gerhard Schröder (SPD—Social Democratic Party), and his main challenger, Edmund Stoiber (CDU/CSU—Christian Social Democrats/ Christian Social Union), have promised additional assistance. But both men will inevitably shift the burden of the crisis onto the shoulders of the population.

For years, both the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats have been pursuing a policy of redistribution of wealth from the working population to the rich, and there is no

reason to expect a reverse of this policy in the face of the current catastrophe. Quite the opposite, the floods will be used to further tax the working people. According to various sources, the government is planning to increase the value-added tax from its current level of 16 percent to as high as 21 percent. But, in advance of the elections, official government spokesmen have denied such plans.

Last Monday the German government decided to postpone by one year the implementation of the second stage of its tax reform. The changes, aimed at further tax reductions for German companies, are now to take effect in 2004. The tax outlays that will continue to be paid at the national, state and local level are to be consolidated into a "solidarity fund." By these means, according to Chancellor Schröder, it will be possible to raise 6.9 billion euros to compensate for flood damage. In reality, no extra money is being raised for the local and regional (Länder) authorities; existing revenues are simply being shifted around.

Additional monies pledged by the European Union (5.1 billion euros) will also be diverted from existing EU programmes, resulting in cuts at a later date or in other areas. Such plans were discussed and promises made at the so-called "Flood-Water Summit" held last Sunday at the behest of Chancellor Schröder and attended by leading representatives of the EU, as well as ministers from the countries affected. EU money planned for the former East German states up to the year 2006 is now to be paid out in advance to help finance the costs incurred by the floods. Additional EU subsidies for agriculture and infrastructure are also to be diverted to cover the flood damage.

At the end of the summit meeting, Schröder and the Austrian head of government Wolfgang Schüssel (Austrian Peoples Party) gave assurances that the European stability pact would not be threatened by the flood expenditures.

On August 14 Schröder made a well-publicized visit to the devastated town of Grimma and retorted that, in light of the situation in East Germany, he was no longer interested in keeping to EU budgetary targets. His finance minister, Hans Eichel (SPD), however, insisted that the government would keep to the Maastricht criteria, which limit new borrowing to 3 percent of the gross domestic product. "There can be no question regarding our commitment to the European stability pact," Eichel said.



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