Heat wave kills more than 1,200 in south India

R. Shree Haran
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A severe heat wave has killed more than 1,200 people over the past three weeks in India with more than 1,065 deaths recorded in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. Women, children and the elderly are among the dead. According to media reports, police have found several bodies on the roadside, including along the route to Hyderabad, the state capital.

Only three of Andhra Pradesh's 23 districts have escaped the heat wave. According to figures provided by the state's relief commissioner D.C. Roshaiash, Nalgonda district was the hardest hit with 204 deaths recorded so far. In West Godavari district at least 175 have died, 152 in East Godavari, 138 in Guntur and 98 in Prakasam, with 15 fatalities in other districts.

These official figures, however, underestimate the actual toll and doubts have been raised about their accuracy because some districts have not reported a single heat wave death. One government official admitted: "This is suspicious. Either the district administrations are burying any heat wave deaths to ensure a clean image for the districts, or other districts are inflating the number of such deaths, which is unlikely."

Deaths from heat stroke have also been reported in other Indian states, including East Orissa where nearly 100 have died, three in Rajasthan, six in Uttar Pradesh and three in Bihar's Newada district.

Temperatures have risen to between 45 and 50 degrees Celsius (113 to 122 degrees Fahrenheit), nearly 10 degrees above the normal level, with the highest reading of 50 degrees reported in Visakhapatnam, 600 kilometres northeast of Hyderabad. At Nungambakkam in Chennai, capital of the southern state of Tamil Nadu, temperatures have reached 45 degrees, the highest recorded in 93 years.

In East Godavari district, top government administrator K. S. Jawahar Reddy told the media: "We are not able to sit in the buildings because it has become unbearably hot. At the same time, we cannot go out because of the heat wave and fear of sunstroke." But for the thousands of people living in tin-roofed shanties and other inadequate dwellings, or the homeless who sleep on the pavements, the situation has become a catastrophe.

Andhra Pradesh has one of the highest concentrations of the poor in India, with almost 12 million, or 15 percent of the state's population, living below the government designated poverty line. These people, especially peasants, rickshaw pullers and daily wage laborers, as well as street hawkers, beggars and homeless laborers, are all forced to work outside, and consequently have become the main victims of the heat. Rajat Kumar, an administrative head in Vizinagaram, was obliged to confess: "A large number of people who have been killed are those who survive on daily wages ... they have no choice but to go out in search of work everyday."

Satyanarayana, who makes his living selling watermelon to drivers and passengers on the highway in Konakanchi, 250 kilometres southeast of Hyderabad, told the local media: "There is no water in this area, even for animals. We have to walk two kilometres to get drinking water in this scorching heat."

Last week the *Times of India* described the circumstances in which some of the Hyderabad residents died. Fifty-two-year-old G. Pochaiah was found unconscious near a temple at Rajendranagar and died in hospital the same day. Sattaiah, a lorry driver in his early 50s, had parked his vehicle and was walking towards a hotel when he collapsed and died.

The bodies of several unidentified people aged between 28 and 75 have been found on the streets in

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various towns. Police in Mangalhat recovered the corpse of an unidentified man aged around 50, while Charminar police found the body of a 65-year-old man near Ghansi Bazar. On the same day, an 80-year-old woman was found dead near the Yakutpura railway station.

Despite daily reports of the mounting disaster, Andhra Pradesh disaster relief commissioner D.C. Roshaiash has attempted to downplay the extent of the crisis, claiming that the death toll was lower than last year. He told the media the figures were lower "because of the government's precautionary steps which involved crisis monitoring, food-for-work schemes in drought-hit areas and other relief measures."

But these so-called precautionary steps are virtually non-existent for the tens of thousands of poor people who confront a life-threatening situation. Andhra Pradesh faces not only record heat, but also its worst drought in 40 years, with June monsoon rains already delayed. Despite this, the state government has simply told people to remain indoors and drink plenty of water, demonstrating its total disregard for the poor. It gave the same advice in May last year when a heat wave took more than 1,030 lives.

Rather than the death rate remaining below last year's figure, worsening temperatures and a lack of assistance is pushing it far higher. Every day brings reports of increasing numbers suffering sunstroke and severe dehydration, with vomiting and high fever. Hundreds of people with these symptoms have been admitted to Andhra Pradesh hospitals. According to hospital administrator Kotaiah Naik in the last 15 days at least 40 patients per day were admitted to his hospital with sunstroke.

State government assistance consists of limited compensation to the families of those who have perished but even this paltry amount has been reduced in the last year. In 2002 Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu promised to pay each affected family 50,000 rupees ($US1,060) compensation. This has now been cut to a mere 10,000 rupees. Families attempting to claim the money have to register the death with police and other government bodies, but under the present heat wave conditions, reporting to the authorities is difficult for those in city areas and virtually impossible for the poor in remote areas.

In reality, the Indian federal and state governments have had no comprehensive plan to assist the population during the heat waves and droughts that have hit Andhra Pradesh in 1996, 1998 and in the latter part of last year.

The lack of planning and official assistance has even provoked an editorial from the *Hindustan Times*. On June 4 it condemned "the apparent lack of will on the part of the authorities to do anything more than offer sympathies and shrug helplessly". The editorial pointed out that it was not "a freakish summer that's gotten out of hand" but that previous heat waves had "claimed enough lives to have made any government determined to work out emergency civil defense plans to deal with killer heat waves like this one".

An emergency plan to cut the disastrous number of fatalities requires massive funding to assist outdoor workers and others most vulnerable to the heat, so they can remain indoors until temperatures drop. Emergency shelter should be provided for the homeless and accommodation for the poor substantially improved. Such a program, however, requires the federal and state governments to divert a greater part of the national income away from big business and the wealthy: something that they are not prepared to do.

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