

South Asian floods kill hundreds and leave millions homeless

R. Shreeharan
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Since the beginning of June, South Asia has been hit by devastating flooding caused by the annual monsoon. At least 445 people have been killed and millions left homeless across India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal. Continuing rain, rising floodwaters and the consequent danger of water-borne diseases like diarrhea, malaria, gastroenteritis and Japanese encephalitis could increase the death toll.

In India, the worst affected area has been the north-eastern state of Assam. Two waves of flooding have left nearly 160 people dead and about 3.3 million homeless. More than 3,000 villages in 20 of the state's 24 districts are still submerged after the Brahmaputra River, one of Asia's largest, overflowed its banks.

Delmaji, Goalpara, Lakhimpur and Nalbari are the most severely damaged districts. In Delmaji, more than one million people were forced to leave their homes. In Nalbari district, almost half of the 5,000 refugees in makeshift camps are suffering from diseases, including diarrhea, fever and jaundice.

Many people were forced to flee at short notice, grabbing a few clothes and other items, as water engulfed their villages. A 16-year-old youth was swept away after an embankment collapsed in the village of Sorabari in Kamrup district. Two people drowned when their boats capsized as they tried to escape the floods in eastern Morigaon district.

Homen Das, a villager, told the media: "We could see some of the huts simply caving in and a few cattle being swept away by the river current... We watched all this happen in front of our eyes although we could do very little to protect our homes." Another resident, Rashid Ahmed, explained: "I have lost my home and agricultural land. Not only mine, around 10-12 villages have already been submerged in the floods... The Brahmaputra River has reduced our land to a great extent. We have become beggars now."

As in other areas, the Congress-led state government in Assam failed to take any measures to protect lives. Once the flooding began, Assam Flood Control Minister Nurzamal Sarkar told the Agence France Presse that the "situation

remains grim". The government would "maintain a close watch on the situation," he promised. But little has been done to alleviate the suffering.

State government officials insist that dozens of relief camps have been established. But tens of thousands of people are huddled on mud embankments and other raised platforms, without food, drinking water and medicine.

An elder in the village of Madarchinga told the *Cape Times*: "We have got nothing in the form of relief from the government since we left our homes four days ago when flood waters entered our village. People will die of hunger and disease with no food and medical aid coming in from the authorities."

Madhusmita Deka explained: "My six-year-old daughter is suffering from dysentery and dehydration but I don't have water to give her the tablets prescribed by the doctor. ... I don't know if her condition will get worse now as I had to give her muddy water to drink."

The state government has blamed the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led government in New Delhi for not supplying enough resources. Assam's Chief Minister Tarun Gogi told the media last week that the central government had "failed to sanction any money for flood relief works, causing the situation to turn into probably the worst in living memory".

Flood Control Minister Sarkar also accused the central government of not providing enough money for flood control management schemes in the state. BJP officials in turn blamed the state government for not applying to New Delhi for assistance.

This is all a cynical charade. The annual monsoon has produced similar tragedies in Assam and other areas for years. Nothing is done to prevent the flooding and minimal government assistance is provided to the victims. In order to divert popular anger over government inaction, the state and federal politicians point the finger at each other and hope that the hostility will dissipate with the floodwaters—until next year.

Flooding disasters have been reported elsewhere across the subcontinent.

In Himachal Pradesh in northern India, at least 100 people were killed and around 30 injured last week in Kulu district, when a flash flood struck a power project construction camp. It is estimated that about 400 people, including workers and children—mostly poor migrants from Bihar and Nepal—had been sleeping in their huts when the water suddenly inundated the area. Local villagers reported bodies floating in the nearby swollen Parvati River.

In the eastern state of Bihar, more than 21 deaths have been reported and flooding has affected 1.5 million people. According to District Magistrate Amrit Lal Meena, water-borne diseases such as cholera and diarrhea have affected 250,000 people. In Tripura in northeastern India, at least 10,000 people have been displaced.

In West Bengal, 29 people have been killed in a mudslide, while another six were drowned in the flood. Four deaths were reported in New Delhi, and another eight have been reported from the western state of Rajasthan over the past week.

One third of Bangladesh has been submerged by floodwaters over the past fortnight, affecting at least 25 of the country's 64 districts. The death toll reached 154 on July 17 and 2.5 million people have been marooned. In Sirajganj district, a farmer and his five-year-old son were swept away when the boy fell from the boat. Four more children drowned in the same district and neighbouring Manikganj district. Seven people died last Friday when their small wooden boat capsized in swirling floodwaters in northern Rangpur district.

Floodwaters have washed away thousands of huts, drowned livestock and swamped paddy fields. About 400,000 Bangladeshi villagers have been left homeless. Thousands of families have fled to schools and mosques, while others have been forced to take shelter on levee banks. Lack of food and clean water has led to cases of diarrhea and fever.

On July 6, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia held an emergency discussion with senior ministers and announced that the government would ensure that flood victims were receiving food and other aid. But the conditions for most of the homeless have not improved.

Pakistan and Nepal have also been affected. About 35 people died when a small dam burst in Pakistan's Sindh Province, flooding the surrounding area. In Nepal, the Natural Calamity and Disaster Management Centre reported that a landslide swept through the mountain village of Ikhabu, destroying two dozen houses and killing 67 people.

Every year, monsoon flooding hits South Asia affecting the lives of millions of people. The dangers posed by the Brahmaputra River, which originates in Tibet and flows across Assam before entering Bangladesh and joining the

sea at Bay of Bengal, are well known. But there is no coordinated plan for preventing such disasters or even a system of providing early warnings to minimise the impact.

According to a report from the *Express News Service*: "Records show at least 12 expert panels were constituted between 1929 and 1980 to suggest steps to control the Brahmaputra. These were followed by the formation of the Brahmaputra Board that has also come out with a series of master plans. Most of these plans also are yet to be implemented."

Governments in the region are incapable of establishing a warning system. Kunda Dixit from Nepal and Inam Ahmed, a Bangladeshi journalist, noted in a joint report that though "everyone seems to agree that best way to avoid casualties would be to have an effective early warning system for floods based on rainfall and river flow data," no progress has been made.

"At present, the data on water levels and rainfall are first sent to the Indian Meteorological Department from where it is transmitted to the Bangladesh Met Office after obtaining necessary clearance. From there, the information is disseminated to other offices, and by the time it reaches the flood-prone districts in Bangladesh it is too late," they explained.

The failure of successive governments in the region to take the most basic measures to prevent flood disasters is not simply the product of individual politicians or administrations. The lack of money and coordination stems from the capitalist system itself which maintains the arbitrary carve-up of the subcontinent along national lines and puts the profits of a few ahead of the needs of masses of ordinary working people.



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