

Over 100 children drown as flood season begins in China

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Heavy rains, floods and landslides are again inflicting terrible suffering on China's rural poor. Hundreds of people have died and millions have been affected since the beginning of the annual wet season. One of the most tragic incidents was the death of more than 100 children on June 10.

A heavy storm hit the area surrounding Ning'an City, about 450 km from the provincial capital Harbin in north eastern Heilongjiang province, at around 2 pm. More than 200 mm of rain fell in just 40 minutes upstream of a local river. Both the river and a reservoir at Hesheng Village overflowed, creating a two-metre high flash flood that engulfed low-lying areas. One of the areas worst affected was the township of Shalan, where the Central Elementary School was virtually submerged.

A teacher told Chinese television: "The water kept rising, and we were shouting at the students to hold on to their desks, that they had to hold on and not let go."

A father who spoke to the *China Daily* said he found the body of his son lying across a desk: "The desk's surface was only a little higher than the water level... His nose, ears and mouth were filled with garbage, and when I touched him, I found he was dead."

Another distraught father said: "We still haven't found our child. We only had the one child. A daughter. She was in the fifth grade and had good marks." A mother told the *Los Angeles Times*: "When we forced our way in, there were little bodies floating everywhere. The parents went mad. Everyone was crying."

Seven out of the 18 villages in the Ning'an City area were severely damaged by the flood. About 1,333 hectares of farmland was destroyed and at least 55 houses collapsed. An estimated 10,000 people have been evacuated from the worst affected areas.

The official death toll is now 106—102 pupils and four

villagers. Residents, however, have put the figure at about 200. The *China Daily* quoted one resident as saying the official toll was inaccurate because it did not include children who were buried by their parents soon after the disaster. The local education bureau said it was difficult to know how many people were missing because many families had left the area. The primary school in Shalan had 351 students in class at the time, between the ages of 6 and 14.

Angry parents said the school and their children were put at added risk by the neglect, corruption and indifference of local government officials. The school is located on the north bank of a river, but the authorities had allowed buildings to be put up on the opposite bank. As the water rushed down the river, the flood was channeled directly toward the classrooms.

When the school was being reconstructed several years ago, the initial plan was for it to be a two-storey building. Only one floor was ever built, however, and villagers believe officials pocketed the rest of the money. Other villagers believe the original playground might have been large enough to absorb much of the water, but much of it was taken up after teachers were permitted to build homes on the land.

A police officer involved in the rescue effort told the media: "The flood would not have killed so many children if the school was not located in such an unfortunate position."

Hesheng Village said they issued an urgent flood warning to the local government of Shalan township when the reservoir overflowed, but the alert was ignored. The villagers said the officials had left early because the next day was a major festival.

The *South China Morning Post* reported that villagers blocked major roads leading to Ning'an on June 11 and 12 to protest over the time it took to organise a rescue

operation and to demand an official investigation. Many villagers had already found their children's bodies before rescue teams arrived. On the day of the flood, parents who raced to the school on motorbikes were stopped by police officers and fined for permit violations.

In response to the protests, the authorities have gone into damage control. The state media has reported that both the public security office head and the township governor of Shalan were being questioned for failing to organise a timely rescue during the flood. Provincial governor Zhang Zuoji has declared he is willing to face any disciplinary penalties from the government.

The 140 surviving students were sent back to school on June 13. Classes were moved to Shalan Middle School and the students given counselling by psychologists. Compensation of 150,000 yuan (\$US18,120) has been offered to families who lost children, as well as a state-financed cremation. Those who accepted the offer by June 15 were offered an extra 5,000 yuan.

These actions have done little to stem the outrage. Many villagers are demanding compensation of at least 400,000 yuan. Gao Wenjun, whose niece drowned in the flood, told *AsiaNews* his family would not consider the offer. He asked: "How can we accept such a small amount of money for the loss of a young life?"

In the same week as the tragedy in Shalan, more than 300 people in southern China lost their lives in floods, and 138,000 homes were inundated. Heavy rain has been falling in eight provinces of China since May 31 and is moving to the south.

The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies estimate that floods and landslides have affected 9.7 million people in southern and central China. At least 300,000 people have been forced to evacuate their farms so far.

The Ministry of Civil Affairs has reported that total damage has reached 3.17 billion yuan (\$381.9 million). In addition, 510,000 hectares of farmland has been flooded. The worst-hit provinces are Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Sichuan and Guizhou provinces and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, as well as Chongqing Municipality.

Government media said more flooding is likely as heavy downpours are predicted for northern and southern China and several rivers have already swollen

to dangerous levels. The water level in the streams of the Huaihe River, the country's third longest river, has risen sharply, while tributaries of the Yangtze River have also risen in the Three Gorges area.

Millions of people are at risk over the coming months because of the failure of the Chinese regime to put in place adequate warning systems or carry out basic maintenance on flood control measures.

Large parts of the country are still using antiquated alerts such as bonfires or gunshots. The decrepit state of China's dams and reservoirs is a particular cause of concern. Water Resources Minister Wang Shucheng told the state media earlier this month that nearly 30,000 reservoirs, or 36 percent of the country's total, have "safety problems that deserve special attention". The state of the reservoirs has, however, been public knowledge since at least 1999.

The *Peoples Daily* reported on June 7: "The problems include worsening seepage and dams in danger of collapsing because of aging or substandard design." Over 20,000 people drowned in 1975 when two dams collapsed in Henan province.



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