

China faces worst floods since 1998

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The summer flooding season in China has again produced a massive death toll, as well as threatening the lives and livelihoods of millions more people in numerous cities and regions. Since the beginning of June, the start of the rainy season, more than 1,000 people have died and hundreds remain missing in the worst flooding since 1998, when 4,185 people were killed.

While the casualties are higher than usual, flooding disasters have become entirely predictable annual events. Last year, according to government statistics, 1,343 people lost their lives in the lowest death toll for several years.

This year, some 2.864 million people have been relocated and the economic losses are estimated at about \$3.354 billion. The civil affairs ministry said 21,474,000 people had been affected to different degrees in the five southern provinces of Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangxi, Hunan and Guangdong, and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

From the middle to the end of June in the southeast the death toll was at least 131 and 900,000 people were evacuated. In parts of Guangxi, the flooding was the worst in a century, with Xiangzhou County receiving one third of its annual rainfall in less than three days. Guangxi, on China's southern coast, northwest of Hong Kong, is one of the country's poorest areas. A total of 570,000 people were evacuated from flood-prone areas there. News reports said floodwaters in some parts of Guangxi reached the third floor of buildings.

Authorities were air-dropping food and drinking water to 10,000 stranded people near the industrial city of Wuzhou. Some 42,000 people were evacuated from low-lying areas of the city because it was feared that floodwaters would burst protective dikes.

The flooding along the Min River in Fujian was the worst in two decades, a spokesman for the

government's anti-flood agency said. A mudslide swept a bus and a car off a highway and into a river near the city of Jian'ou, leaving 23 people missing. About 320,000 people were evacuated in the province and 25,000 people were relocated in neighbouring Guangdong.

In Sichuan province, during the first half of July, 72 people died, 30 were reported missing, 30,000 houses were destroyed and another 106,000 were damaged. About 428,000 people from seven cities were forced to flee their homes. The flooding affected 84 counties and cities in the province, after rainfalls of more than 200 millimetres. There has been an estimated \$492 million in damage, yet China's civil affairs and finance ministries have allocated just \$2.7 million in disaster relief funds to the cities.

In the worst-hit city, Dazhou, where floodwaters reached the third storeys of some buildings, most roads were cut, and water, phones and power supplies were knocked out. Some 150,000 people were evacuated following the highest rainfall in about 100 years during the first week of July. Up to 46 centimetres of rain fell on parts of the city, leaving some streets under 5 metres of water.

Three days of torrential rains in Shaaxi province left nine people dead and six others missing. The provincial department of civil affairs said the downpour triggered mountain torrents, landslides and mud-rock flows in 40 townships of 12 counties, affecting more than 300,000 people. The deluge destroyed than 35,000 houses and hit 349,900 hectares of farmland, causing losses of \$26.6 million.

In Anhui province, flooding has resulted in losses of \$48 million. More than 400,000 hectares of farmland in 20 counties have been inundated. No deaths have been reported, but 1,400 houses have been damaged or destroyed. The water level at the Xixian County Hydrologic Station on the Huaihe River reached 42.92

metres—1.42 metres above the danger level.

The China Meteorological Administration forecast more floods in late July for the regions in the middle reaches of the Yellow, Yangtze, Liaohe and Haihe rivers. It said the country's average temperature in June was 22.3 degrees Celsius and the average rainfall was 136.9 millimeters, both higher than previous years. It said heavy rainfall caused severe floods in areas south of the Yangtze River. Water levels in the Xijiang River in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region were the highest since 1949, while the swelling of the Minjiang River caused the area's worst flooding in 21 years.

The Meteorological Administration also predicted that the provinces of Hunan and eastern Guizhou could receive 20 to 30 percent more rain than average. In eastern, central southern and southwestern areas, it forecast more than 100 millimetres of rain, with falls in the Three Gorges and south China areas reaching 200-300 millimetres. About 30 percent above-average rain was predicted for northeast China, the middle and eastern parts of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Xingjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, northern Hebei Province and the middle reaches of the Yellow, Haihe and Liaohe rivers.

After an assessment visit, the Red Cross Society of China branch in Guangxi said the leading cause of damage to houses was the use of poor quality construction materials. Many farmers were unable to afford cement and other proper materials so many houses were built with a mud-based sealant, which was unable to stand up against floodwaters. Many of the displaced villagers were living in tents, provided by the Red Cross or by the government, which has begun to construct temporary wooden shelters.

In the main, the government's response has been one of damage control instead of prevention. Civil affairs vice minister Jia Zhibang said major disasters causing deaths exceeding 10 people must be reported directly to his ministry within two hours.

Relief and temporary shelter has been provided, and mass migrations organised to reduce the number of flood-related deaths and injuries. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers and reservists have been dispatched to help with evacuations and the reinforcement of dykes. Helicopters and transport aircraft have been used to airdrop food supplies to areas not easily reached by land.

Vice premier Hui Liangyu said local governments must adopt substantial measures to control the surging floods. He called on the relevant departments to work hard to check and reinforce dykes and dams, prepare anti-flood materials and cope with possible dangers in time, and urged meteorologists to provide accurate and timely information to help make scientific flood-control decisions.

The only government official reported to have suffered consequences because of the floods was the director of water resources for Wuzhou. He was dismissed for failing to resolutely carry out orders for flood prevention but no details were provided.

The cycle of death and destruction will only continue until the underlying reasons for the floods and the poverty are addressed. The primary factors include declines in natural reservoirs such as forests and lakes, increased silting of rivers and lakes from deforested land in the Yangtze basin and the encroachment on riverbeds by farmers. Dams that were built to help control the flooding have become too small.

One of the progressive measures carried out after the 1949 revolution was the mobilisation of millions of people to construct irrigation projects, reservoirs and other flood control measures. Despite the bureaucratic methods and mismanagement of the Maoist regime, the floods that have occurred in China almost annually for thousands of years were significantly reduced for several decades.

However, the entire hydraulic system has been run down and ruined over the past 25 years of "market reforms", accompanied by the government's cutting of social spending as well as pervasive official corruption. With no scientific direction and coordination, millions of poor peasants have continued to cut down forests for wood and fuel, while the toxic pollution emitted by China's booming but deregulated industries has caused enormous damage to the environment as a whole.



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