

Torrential rains and flooding hit India's financial centre

Ram Kumar
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Torrential rains and flooding have had a devastating impact on Mumbai (Bombay), India's financial capital, and surrounding areas over the last week. The death toll has climbed to more than 1,000 and tens of thousands more than been left homeless. Overwhelmingly, the worst affected have been the poor from the city's slums and from outlying rural villages.

The monsoonal rains began on July 26, when an unprecedented 76 centimetres of rain fell in just 24 hours, devastating the city's inadequate infrastructure. Flooding and landslides cut roads and rail and snapped electricity and power lines. The international airport was only "partially operational", with a number of airlines being forced to cancel flights.

Tens of thousands of people were stranded for hours or compelled to wade through water to get home. Some died in submerged cars. Ground-floor apartments were flooded. The carcasses of thousands of dead animals littered the streets. The narrow alleyways in the shantytowns, where between a third and a half of the city's population of 15 million live, were turned into raging torrents. In the Saki Naka area, a massive landslide swept away 135 huts, killing several people.

The lack of clean drinking water has raised fears of an epidemic of water-borne diseases. Biju Mathew, a World Vision India (WVI) representative, told the media: "Anti-diarrhoeal and anti-malarial medicines used to prevent water-borne diseases are not available. These medicines are needed as there could be a disease outbreak." Another WVI official Reena Samuel explained that many people had lost all their provisions in the floods and were in urgent need of emergency rations.

Areas near Mumbai have also been hard hit. About 14,000 passengers were stranded at railway stations in the Nandurbar district due to flooding at the Mumbai end of the line. Several trains were sent back to their originating points on July 27. Milk tankers as well as vegetable trucks

could not reach Mumbai as the main Mumbai-Agra national highway was flooded near the Shahapur area.

The BBC reported that 22 people died in the village of Diva and another 10,000 lost their homes and paddy fields. "What we have now is what's left on our bodies," one villager said.

In the Satara district, 50 villages were cut off after authorities were compelled to open all 10 floodgates of the Koyana dam because of the heavy rain in the catchment area. Floodwaters submerged roads and bridges in the Patan and Karad areas.

An estimated 20 million people across the state of Maharashtra have been affected by the flooding. Damage to industry, agriculture and infrastructure is put at between \$US700 and \$2.8 billion. The slow response of state and national governments to the crisis has provoked angry demonstrations by victims who have been left without food, water, shelter and other essentials.

Thousands of men, women and children staged 24-hour "rasta rokos" (blocking highways) at more than 16 places in Mumbai to protest over the lack of assistance. Residents from the government settlement in Bandra marched to the local government offices on July 27 after local authorities failed to carry out their promise to restore water supplies. The city's police commissioner A.N. Roy warned Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh that the situation could get out of hand if the power supplies were not restored.

An article in the *Hindustan Times* on August 2 commented: "The spontaneous response of over 5,000 angry residents of Kurla, facing acute problems of electricity and clean water for five days, was indeed befitting. It was, indeed, shameful that people at the helm of affairs in the city did little to mitigate the sufferings of the poor and disadvantaged citizens affected by the heavy downpour last week. The rasta roko and dharnas by the citizens of Kurla is a signal to all the powers-be that

‘enough is enough’. That limits of tolerance have been crossed and the common man cannot take things lying down meekly.”

A group of filmmakers and media personalities, including filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt and director Vinta Nanda, has announced public interest litigation against the state government over its failures during the floods. Bhat told the press: “We are punished if we don’t do our duty of paying taxes. Why should the government not be punishable if it neglects its duty?”

Chief Minister Deshmukh acknowledged last week that “the machinery was not as effective” but tried to brush off criticisms by declaring “we have learnt our lessons”. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, whose Congress Party is a partner in the state government, also tried to deflect opposition, praising the residents for bearing “a lot of personal distress in silence”. He toured Mumbai a week ago and promised \$500 million in assistance to upgrade the city’s drainage system.

Both governments have been seeking to promote Mumbai as a go-ahead economic and financial centre capable of rivalling India’s global rivals. Deshmukh once declared that Shanghai should be the “benchmark” for Mumbai’s development. But it is precisely this anarchic economic development that has led to an explosion of poorly planned construction that has strained Mumbai’s antiquated infrastructure to the limit.

City authorities were responsible for bulldozing large areas of slums earlier this year, leaving an estimated 400,000 people homeless, in order to make way for further development. The displaced were among the hardest hit by the flooding. In the aftermath, state water resources minister Ajit Pawar blamed slum dwellers for clogging the drains with rubbish and called for fresh demolition drives.

However, as social activist Medha Patkar explained: “Everybody, media to the ministers, blames slum-dwellers for blocked drains, but the municipal engineers, after preliminary surveys, have acknowledged that the real cause is large scale construction activity which should not have been undertaken without first providing for adequate drainage”.

An article in the *New York Times* pointed to some of the underlying causes: “Mangrove swamps, which act as nature’s bathtub during the rainy season, have been built over. A river that once allowed storm water to be carried down to the Arabian Sea has been pinched by the construction of a road to connect a northern suburb to midtown Mumbai.”

The Mumbai drainage system was built over a century ago, during the period of British colonial rule. According to city municipal commissioner Johnny Joseph, a plan for a \$3 billion upgrade has been put before the national government but has not yet been approved.

Majid Memon, a lawyer involved in the public interest litigation case, commented to Associated Press: “Last week’s disaster has exposed the city’s inability to cope with such crisis. It is a manifestation of a larger problem—the manner in which we have ignored the basic interests of the people of Mumbai. If we can develop the technology to make nuclear bombs and launch satellites, why can’t we build better drains, better roads, give our citizens better amenities?”

The obvious answer to the question lies in the operation of the market. Successive municipal, state and national governments have all been intent on opening up India to foreign investment and transforming Mumbai in particular into a financial and economic hub. As a result, city authorities have ignored planning principles and bulldozed slums in order to provide land for high-rise development. As in Shanghai, the divide between rich and poor has deepened and infrastructure has been stretched to the limit. The consequence has been a disaster that has claimed more than a thousand lives and brought terrible suffering to many more.

One can predict in advance that Deshmukh’s statement about “learning lessons” will be forgotten as soon as the flooding fades from the media. The year began with the tsunami catastrophe that claimed more than 15,000 lives in southern India. In June, heat waves with temperatures reaching 47°C caused the death of more than 370, mostly poor people, throughout India. That was followed by heavy rains and flooding in the state of Gujarat which killed 142 people. In each of these cases, little or nothing has been done to prepare for or prevent future tragedies.



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