

# India: floods kill hundreds in Tamil Nadu

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At least 279 people have been killed, and an estimated 200,000 made homeless, in severe floods in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The flooding was caused by torrential rain over four weeks in October and early November, and was compounded by more monsoonal storms which hit the region between November 21 and 24. The authorities' lack of precautionary flood prevention measures and grossly inadequate emergency relief measures exacerbated the plight of ordinary people affected by the natural disaster.

Approximately 700,000 people were trapped in the floods, which also damaged at least 350,000 hectares of agricultural crops. More than 3,000 irrigation tanks and 1,500 riverbanks and channels were breached. Educational institutions were closed, and power supplies had to be shut off to avoid risk of electrocution. Bridges and culverts were destroyed, and an estimated 20,000 km of roads suffered heavy damage, including the National Highway 45, which connects Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu, to other southern parts of the state.

The state government's negligent response to the catastrophe sparked demonstrations in Madras. Beginning in late October, men, women and children staged *dharnas* (sit-down protests) and erected road blockades to demand an adequate flood relief package.

In Salem, protesting handicraft weavers were brutally attacked by police. In Seerkhazhi, people seized a private bus and "arrested" a local district revenue officer after they were brought to a local school for shelter, but were not provided with anything to eat. The officer was only released after police intervened.

In the Chennai, Thiruvallur, and Kanchipuram districts, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) led state government distributed 2,000 rupees (\$US43), one dhoti, one saree, 10 kilograms of rice and one litre of kerosene to those holding the limited green colour ration card. In 19 other Tamil Nadu districts, those affected were eligible for just 1,000 rupees and limited emergency supplies.

In Vyasaripadi, north Madras, only one emergency aid

centre was opened by the government, which led to the death of six women in a stampede on November 6. Dozens more were injured as the desperately poor residents scrambled to receive food aid.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of those involved in the crush. Michael, a 45-year old government employee, was one of those injured. "The main reason for these deaths was the absence of police protection and the issuing of the [emergency ration] token for the whole area at one place," he told the WSWS. "They were covering more than 20 ration shops. Each ration shop handles the distribution for nearly 1,600 families. So there was a big crowd.

"First the media announced the relief measure on November 3. There was a rumour that the people should collect it within that week. On November 6 further news appeared in the press that it was extended up to November 12, but most people didn't notice this. So there was a big crowd even at 3 o'clock in the morning. There were about 3,000 poor people assembled there in front of the college gate, where the fund was given... After this incident the authorities opened more distributing centres. Why didn't they organise this earlier?"

Government officials dismissed accusations that they were in any way responsible for the stampede, and sought to blame the flood victims themselves.

Other deaths resulted from buses being overcome by floodwaters. In southern Tamil Nadu, 145 people were killed when a public bus was swept off a bridge by a sudden surge of water. In another incident, 80 people were reported killed after a private bus tried to cross an overflowing causeway across the Maharajasamudram River. Local residents accused government authorities of not informing people about the dangers caused by the flood to road transportation.

On November 18, the central flood damage assessing team led by the joint secretary of the Home Ministry, T.S. Misra, came to Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry on a four-day visit. In her recent appeal to the Indian federal government in Delhi, Chief Minister Jayaram Jayalalithaa

increased her demand of flood relief fund from 17.42 billion rupees to 136.85 billion from the National Calamity Contingency Fund (NCCF) maintained by the central government.

Thousands of families previously made homeless by last year's devastating tsunami were caught up in the recent flooding. Despite government promises, large numbers of tsunami survivors have not been provided with replacement housing, and remain in substandard temporary shelters. Heavy rain quickly flooded many of these refugee centres.

A local administrator in the Nagapattinam district reported that 10,000 people had been moved to new relief camps, and that at least 10 of the nearly 60 camps housing tsunami survivors in the district were inundated. Many tsunami survivors who were provided with makeshift housing were also forced to flee, as they were settled in low lying areas that were flooded by the rains.

In Chennai, Nagamma Mayilvel, a 28-year old tsunami survivor who was provided one of these houses, spoke with the WWS. "The government initially allotted these makeshift houses to 350 families," she explained. "A total of 1,360 families are now here. Most of them are daily wage labourers like painters and masons. My husband is a driver of tricycle cart, and he can earn 70 or 100 rupees per day by carrying goods from one place to another.

"[After the flood] government authorities gave us 1,000 rupees and asked us to stay at a relative's or neighbour's house. But how can we even cook when 100 grams of tomato is selling at three rupees and one litre of kerosene costs 30 rupees?"

Raju Velayutham, described how the flooding forced him to move from the makeshift housing he and his family had stayed in over the past eight months. "We can't afford the 2,000 rupee advance for another house. Some families joined together and are paying 500 rupees rent. Some families are jointly cooking also. I am a fisherman. We can't get a job, and since we lost our ration card we are not eligible to receive the government's 2,000 rupee flood relief fund."

Successive state and federal governments failed to invest in adequate flood prevention measures. Weather projections issued in late August which predicted heavy monsoon rain were ignored by the state AIADMK regime. The main state opposition party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), accused authorities of failing to ensure pre-monsoon de-silting and cleaning of storm water drains in Chennai, and of ignoring maintenance work in the name of cost-cutting.

However, none of the established parties at either the state or federal level has either the inclination or ability to provide the basic social infrastructure necessary for minimising flood destruction, such as water drainage and distribution, de-silting of tanks and lakes, and building adequate irrigation canals.

The Indian political establishment always responds to the loss of life caused by catastrophes such as floods and earthquakes by disclaiming any responsibility and blaming nature for the destruction. In reality, as with the tsunami and the recent earthquake in Kashmir, the devastation caused by such events is bound up with the right-wing social and economic policies pushed by the ruling elite.

Tamil Nadu has promoted itself as a haven for international investment, and state governments have made every effort to provide attractive infrastructure and investment conditions for transnational companies. Nothing has been done, on the other hand, to overcome the massive levels of poverty and homelessness in the region, or to ensure basic safeguards to prevent the kind of devastation seen in recent weeks.



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