

Devastating floods hit six Chinese provinces

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Annual torrential rains, river overflows, floods and landslides are beginning to hit China, bringing devastation to millions of people. Heavy rain fell on June 6-9 in six southern Chinese provinces—Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, Jiangxi and Fujian—and kept pouring down throughout the week. Although flooding happens almost every year, the Chinese government has done little to prevent it and protect the most vulnerable—the rural poor.

The death toll so far is 128, with another 24 people missing. Some 788,000 people have been evacuated, 69,000 homes destroyed, another 94,000 damaged. Officially, 20,000 people are homeless. At least 24 villages in the six provinces were submerged. Many people are sheltering with relatives, or in schools and tents.

Two weeks ago, the Hanjiang River in Guangdong province reached a 50-year high of 26.44 metres. To protect heavily-populated urban areas along the river, water was diverted, flooding six villages. Most houses were under two metres of water and more than 10,000 people had to be evacuated. Even with this water diversion, the river level dropped only 0.9 metres and is still 3.5 metres above the danger level. A further 2.5 million people are at risk and last-minute efforts are being made to repair dykes.

In Huangjin, township authorities have warned that more heavy rainfall may leave most residents dependent on government food rations. The rice crops in the area have been destroyed.

Meizhou municipality in northeast Guangdong was one of the worst-hit areas. More than 7,000 people had to be evacuated when a 40-metre crack appeared in a nearby dam. The Meizhou area, which is known for the local Hakka culture, is hilly and its residents poor. The railway link was cut off for 92 hours. State-owned CCTV reported that 87,000 people were still trapped in the city.

In Guangxi province, heavy rain has destroyed 29 reservoirs, 162 roads and forced 59 factories to suspend production. The Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, the world's largest hydro-electrical project, had to discharge water on June 5 to lower the level in its reservoir.

On June 17, eight farmers were missing after a mudslide in Hubei province.

The Civil Affairs Ministry estimates the cost of the floods so far at 8.92 billion yuan or \$US1.17 billion. The National Meteorological Centre reports that 23.6 million people have been affected. At least 1,360 square kilometres of crops have been destroyed, sending prices for leafy greens and other vegetables soaring by 40 percent in southern cities. The price of rice is also starting to rise and could remain high, as the rice crop was due to be harvested at the end of the month.

The floods are not simply a natural disaster. In the past, extensive flood plains were uninhabited, forming a natural defence against rising waters. Now, however, many poor farmers have been driven to cultivate these areas and are now paying a heavy price. At the same time, flood control measures such as dams, dykes and reservoirs have been poorly maintained or were badly built in the first place. Economically important cities are relatively well protected by giant dykes, but rural communities and towns, where most of China's people live, have no comparable protection.

Flooding leaves millions of families destitute. In many cases, fields remain covered with silt and cannot be replanted for a long time. Those of working age are forced to the cities to earn enough to rebuild their homes or supplement lost income. The elderly are left behind to look after young children and work any available farmland. The Chinese government has allocated just 100 million yuan (\$US13 million) so far to help the victims of annual floods, compared to this

year's military spending of nearly \$45 billion.

While floods are affecting southern China, there is a severe drought in most parts of northern China and the southwestern provinces of Yunan and Sichuan. Around 11 million people have experience severe water shortages and 8 million hectares of crops have been lost. Some Chinese scientists have warned that such extreme weather may become the pattern for decades to come unless global warming is addressed.

Due to the rapid but anarchic growth of industry in the past three decades, China is now the world's second largest emitter of greenhouse gases. According to the International Energy Agency, China produced 5.6 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide last year, compared to 5.9 billion tonnes by the US. This year China could overtake the US with a projected emission of more than 6 billion tonnes. In order to promote economic growth, Beijing has refused to take serious steps to reduce greenhouse gases unless the US and other industrially developed countries do the same.

At the same time, Chinese authorities are using global warming as a convenient pretext to deflect criticism over inadequate flood protection and relief. Jiao Meiyan, the director of National Meteorological Centre, told *China Daily* on June 11 that the latest flooding disasters were partly caused by "global climate change", adding: "The number of casualties has been declining in recent years, which is substantial progress in a densely populated nation with very complex climate conditions."

Heavy rains, typhoons and floods have occurred in China for centuries. In the early twentieth century, the disintegration of imperial rule and the lack of any central authority left the Chinese masses even more vulnerable to such disasters. A proper system of flood control was a popular demand of the Chinese Revolution in 1949. In the 1950s, the Maoist regime extorted millions of peasants to build dykes and water reservoirs, which, despite unscientific planning and bureaucratic mismanagement, did provide greater protection and improved irrigation.

The decollectivisation of agriculture in the early 1980s meant that rural communities no longer maintained the hydraulic systems. The lack of public funding led to a steady decay of dykes, canals and reservoirs. Profiteering by corrupt officials in collusion with construction companies resulted in the use of

substandard materials and a further erosion of physical defences against flooding.

In 1998, 4,000 people died and 240 million were affected by floods, which cost an estimated \$30 billion. In 2006, the death toll from flooding and typhoons in China was 2,704. Chinese scientists have warned that there is a strong possibility of more flooding along the Yangtze and Songhua rivers, which could cause this year's toll of death and destruction to rise further.



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