31 December 1969

Last week, some of the worst floods on record hit Britain, leaving seven people dead and thousands with homes ruined by sewage and chemicals.

In Sheffield, pensioner Peter Harding died whilst trying to cross a road hit by rising floodwater and schoolboy Ryan Parry was drowned in a swollen river. Mike Barnett, 28, died after becoming trapped in a storm drain in Hull, and Eric Dickinson, 68, was trapped in his submerged car in Pershore, Worcestershire. The body of Hugh Birch, 41, was found floating in the river Leen in Nottingham, and a sixth victim, a man in his 60s, drowned in a waterways lock near Gainsborough in Lincolnshire. The body of an elderly woman was recovered last weekend from the river Severn at Ironbridge, Shropshire.

The cost of damage is estimated at more than £1 billion, with 27,000 homes and 5,000 businesses affected. The Association of British Insurers (ABI) warned that about one in four people did not have contents insurance, so would not be covered for flood damage.

The M1, the UK’s most important motorway, was shut amid fears that the Ulley dam, near Rotherham, would collapse. About 600 people living in villages downstream from the dam had to leave their homes and spend several nights in emergency shelters. In Barnsley, more than 130 streets were affected by flooding.

The Meteorological Office says that June was the wettest in England since 1914, with parts of Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and the Midlands having the worst rainfall for the month since records began. Weather forecasters are warning people to expect more storms. With the ground still saturated, this could cause major problems even if rainfall is not heavy.

The Environment Agency (EA) still has four severe flood warnings in place along the Don Valley, with a further 21 standard warnings in the north and east of England. Emergency services are still working non-stop in the worst affected areas, including Toll Bar and Bentley, near Doncaster, where a sluice gate above the villages failed to open—causing the Ea Beck to burst its banks.

Matt Wrack, general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, said, “The Government has not understood the scale, gravity and severity of what has happened. We have witnessed the biggest rescue effort in peacetime Britain by our emergency services and it’s not over yet. Fire crews and officers have been working to the point of collapse. Emergency fire control operators have been under major pressure, with thousands of extra calls for assistance from the public.”

Tony Blair, in his last day as prime minister, said, “The immediate thing is to make sure we get the right coordination with the emergency services...and that we try to make sure we prevent any further loss of life.”

Ed Miliband, Gordon Brown's new Secretary for the Cabinet Office and MP for Doncaster North, commented, “This is a very serious situation. I am talking to government colleagues about what more can be done to help people out of their situation.”

However, last August, it was on the orders of Brown’s Treasury Department that Miliband’s brother David, Brown’s Foreign Secretary who was then Tony Blair’s minister for the environment, food and rural affairs, forced through a £200 million budget cut.. The Environment Agency (EA) bore the brunt of the cuts, with £15 million slashed from flood defences and £9 million from environmental protection. Officials complained, “The lack of notice of the cuts restricted the options for handling them to what was feasible,” which “in some cases...led to tactical and opportunistic decisions.”

These decisions affected the maintenance programme, flood mapping, flood forecasting and warning and strategy development, including flood management plans and water level management plans. According to a memo issued by EA executives last month, the flood defence programme is facing further funding cuts that could last until 2011. In Yorkshire alone, this has meant the shelving of six major flood defence schemes, including new

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barriers to protect Leeds and Ripon and repairs to flood defences in York.

It should be remembered that after the floods in 2000, which resulted in three deaths and the flooding of several cities, towns and villages twice in two weeks, Blair promised, “We have to put in the right protection for people against the possibility of floods and work to deal with the issue of climate change.” His deputy, John Prescott, asked, “Should our power lines come down every time we have such storms? Should 1,000 trees fall across railway lines in the South East? Should we do more to prevent flooding? Is our drainage system adequate?”

Much of the blame for the floods has been deflected onto the EA, which is responsible for building new and replacement flood defences, flood channel clearance and flood forecasting and warning. Its chief executive, Baroness Young, rejected charges that she had “manifestly failed” and should consider resigning. She blamed inadequate funding for the organisation’s failure to build and maintain flood defences.

According to the National Audit Office (NAO), which issued a report on the EA’s flood defence programme just one week before June’s disaster, the EA spent £483 million on new defences and the maintenance of existing assets last year—an increase on the £303 million spent in 2001, the year of the last big floods. But Stephen Haddrill, the ABI’s director general, says at least £750 million a year is needed.

Although the government points to the EA’s increased budget between 2001 and 2006, the organisation has had to take on responsibility for a lot more flood defence work from other bodies. In 2001, it had responsibility for 11,000 miles of flood channels and embankments and 23,000 structures such as sluices, weirs and pumping stations. In 2006, this had doubled to 24,000 miles and 46,000 structures.

At the same time, the in-house workforce has been cut from 1,570 in 2001 to 1,400 earlier this year, and there are plans to reduce this number to 1,357 by April 2008.

The NAO report praises this reduction and other “positive” factors related to cost control and improved efficiency. But the report is littered with the practical results.

It says the EA has failed to hit its target “to maintain 63 percent of England’s flood defence systems in their target condition.” Even this figure is uncertain because the agency’s IT system is costly and difficult to use, and is unable to hold maintenance records or produce “an accurate and satisfactory report of system condition.”

The NAO concludes that “the limited improvement in asset condition since 2000 suggests that, at the current rate of progress, the Agency will struggle to meet its future condition targets.”

Although the EA has responsibility for thousands of miles of channels and embankments and thousands of structures, most are still owned or maintained by other bodies or private individuals over whom the agency has limited powers. In the “best” EA region, North East Thames, only 30 percent of the 400 third parties contacted had taken any action to repair or maintain their defences.

Over the last 50 years, despite the known threat, property developers have been allowed to construct nearly 2 million households in areas at risk, mainly on floodplains. Of these, 469,000 are at significant risk, Over 40 percent of people living in these homes are unaware of the dangers.

Although the EA has objected to hundreds of developments in recent years, nearly a fifth have been approved—including the Thames Gateway project for 160,000 houses promoted by John Prescott. These developments only have to conform to a risk of flooding once every 100 years compared to the Dutch standard of a risk of a flood every 10,000 years.

Jane Milne, the ABI’s head of property, believes that insurance companies might soon refuse cover for many householders. In the Netherlands, most of which lies below sea level, it has been virtually impossible to get insurance since the 1953 floods.

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