

The human cost of the June floods in Britain

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The flooding disaster that struck villages, towns and cities all over Britain in June has been met with callous indifference by the Labour government of newly installed Prime Minister Gordon Brown and by the Environment Agency.

The flooding was some of the most severe in recorded memory. June was one of the wettest months on record in the UK, with average rainfall across England of 140 mm. Locations hit by the flooding included large areas of Northern Ireland on June 12, North Yorkshire and the Midlands on June 15, and Yorkshire, the Midlands, Gloucestershire and Worcestershire on June 25.

As the flood water is pumped out and water levels recede, the human cost of this tragedy is emerging. Seven people died and many more were injured. Within a day of floods in Sheffield, more than 900 had been forced to live in emergency shelters after being left stranded. An estimated 13,000 people in Sheffield were left without electricity, some for days.

Thousands of people have been left homeless after being forced to evacuate their homes at short notice. More than two weeks after the events, an estimated 17,000 people were homeless in Hull, north Humberside (out of a population of 249,100); 1,000 were homeless in Doncaster, South Yorkshire; and a further 1,000 were homeless in Sheffield.

The majority of these will not be able to return to their houses for many months, if ever, as they are unfit for human habitation due to sewage contamination. Thirty months after floods hit Carlisle in northern England, for example, eleven families have yet to move back into their homes.

In the latest floods, up to 28,000 homes were severely affected or totally ruined, as were 6,800 businesses, affecting the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people. One in five homes in Hull was damaged in the flooding, and 90 out of its 105 schools suffered some damage. The damage to schools is estimated to have cost £100 million.

In South Yorkshire, the floods caused a major emergency after cracks were found in the walls of Ulley reservoir, located four miles south of Rotherham. The reservoir contains 820 million litres (180 million gallons) of water.

Had this dam burst, it would have caused even more devastation. It is also just 2.5 miles from Junction 33 of the M1 motorway—the major north-south route in Britain—and a critical regional electricity substation that supplies much of Sheffield's electricity needs. As concerns grew that the reservoir walls were going to be breached, three of the nearest villages were evacuated—Whiston, Treeton and Catcliffe.

The Association of British Insurers (ABI) said that the damage to business and property nationally is estimated to stand at more than £1.5 billion and rising. Claims from residents are set to reach £825 million, and those from businesses up to £680 million. There have reportedly been 27,500 domestic claims with an average value of £30,000, and 6,800 claims from businesses averaging £100,000.

The Fire Brigades Union described the rescue effort as the biggest in peacetime Britain. By June 28, more than 600 casualties of the flooding had been recorded and fire fighters had rescued 3,500 people across the UK.

Matt Wrack, the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, criticised

the non-response of the government to the crisis. Despite Met Office weather forecasts warning of the danger of widespread flooding, the government refused to put any additional resources into the areas in advance to aid populations deemed to be in the most danger.

The government response to the crisis was firstly to ignore the severity of the problem. Residents in many areas have stated that they were left to fend for themselves for days before any meaningful rescue operation was launched.

The government has offered a paltry £14 million relief package for areas affected. Of this, £10 million is allocated to local councils for rebuilding, while £3 million will go to repair roads and bridges. Just £1 million will go towards helping flood victims replace their lost possessions.

Hull Council leader Carl Minns said, "Fourteen million ... won't even scratch the surface. We need future assurances that more money is on the way." Saying Hull had become a "forgotten city," he added, "Help us with a large injection of capital, otherwise this city will not recover."

The government has so far refused to put aside or pledge any more relief money.

The devastating losses are a direct result of the big business agenda of the Labour government. Between 1997 and 1999, flood defence expenditure fell from £102.6 million to £75.1 million.

Due to continuous cuts in its manpower and budget, the Environment Agency (EA) has not been able to maintain flood defences to a level that is anywhere near adequate. Some towns and cities have no major flood defences at all.

Sheffield was massively affected as the River Don burst its banks. But the case for the city not having any large-scale flood defences was explained by the EA chief executive, Baroness Young, on the basis that it had not had "had a serious flood for 150 years."

In fact, there has been repeated large-scale flooding in Sheffield, particularly over the past ten years, affecting thousands of people. The area of Catcliffe in Sheffield was badly flooded as recently as 2000 and was again severely flooded in the latest disaster. After the 2000 floods, local barriers were built only following demands by residents.

Just days prior to the latest floods, parts of Sheffield, including Catcliffe, had been hit by severe flash flooding. Residents were told once again by the authorities that there was nothing to be concerned about and that the defences were more than adequate.

These assurances proved to be worthless, as more than 1,000 people were evacuated in the early hours of June 25 after 300 homes in Catcliffe were flooded. Such was the level of water that the local Plough public house was flooded nearly to the top of its front entrance door, while a nearby post box was almost entirely submerged.

A statement from Sheffield City Council explained that the city is almost solely reliant on a system of nineteenth century culverts as a flood defence system.

"Whilst flooding from the larger main rivers obviously carries the most widespread threat, Sheffield suffers regular flooding problems at many locations due to lack of capacity and blockages in many of the smaller watercourses, particularly with regard to the culverted lengths through urban development," it said.

The statement continued, “Inevitably, culverts, many laid over 100 years ago, are inadequate to take the peak flows generated, and debris can create blockages, especially at culvert entrances. There are several other sources of flooding, both foul- and surface-water related, which are regularly reported around the City. These include inadequate sized or blocked drains and sewers, surface water run-off, ground water springs, water supply leaks and highway gully problems.”

The EA’s responsibility for Sheffield falls within the remit of the Yorkshire Regional Flood Defence Committee (YRDFC). The planned expenditure of the YRDFC for 2006-2007 is around £40 million, with less than one percent of expenditure on flood defence schemes slated to be spent within Sheffield.

The situation in Hull is even more perilous. Speaking to the Observer newspaper, Councillor Trevor Larsen said, “More than 90 percent of Hull is built below sea level. Huge housing estates have been built on marsh land, yet whenever we have needed help from central government to improve things, we have been neglected.”

Due to the budget cuts, much of the EA’s monies has gone for “non specific maintenance,” while spending on flood defences in areas deemed high priority has been cut back. Figures published on June 14 by the National Audit Office (NAO) revealed that in the northeast of England, 58 percent of the budget was spent on non-specific maintenance, while only 24 percent went to high priority protection. In the southwest of England, just 18 percent of flood defences were in good condition.

The NAO report concluded that 63 percent of flood defences were not properly maintained and that in 54 percent of areas at high risk there was no guarantee that the current defences would hold back rising waters.

This is compounded by the fact many of the existing flood defence infrastructures are privately owned and therefore the EA does not even have a central register of the real state of all flood defences in the UK.

Within days of the NAO publishing its findings, large parts of the country were under water rising up to 10 feet in some areas.

This crisis is set to worsen as the EA is facing budget cuts up to 2011. In August 2006, the EA’s budget was slashed, with £14.9 million cut from flood defences and £9 million from environmental protection. Last month it was revealed that in Yorkshire alone six major flood defence schemes have been shelved, including a £100 million flood defence scheme in Leeds—like Sheffield one of the largest cities in Britain.

Many of those affected by the floods have been the poorest working class people, including the elderly. It is estimated that up to a fifth of homeowners affected will receive nothing in the form of compensation, as they have no insurance cover. Those that are insured will be penalised financially, as their annual premiums are set rise by up to 30 percent because they live in a flood risk area.

Cuts in the Environment Agency flood defence budget have directly contributed to residents not being able to take out insurance. Wherever there is more than a one in 75 annual chance of flooding, and there are no plans to build defences in the next five years, insurance companies have no legal responsibility to offer cover. A present, this means about 400,000 homes across the country cannot be insured.

An estimated 5.5 million people nationally (nearly 10 percent of the entire population) live in houses built on flood plains.

The EA said bluntly, “Insurance companies are a commercial animal, they are there to make money and make a profit. Events such as the floods of Sheffield, Hull and Doncaster affect their profits.”

Insurance companies are now demanding that they receive data on new flood defence maps and planning, as they expect it will reveal that up to one million high-risk homes will be affected. This will be used to deny insurance to even more families.

The government has washed its hands of any responsibility. Speaking in Sheffield, Baroness Young said that “nothing” could have prevented the floods. “The flood was five to seven feet higher than anything we’ve seen

before and was going to overwhelm any flood defences,” Young stated.

But at a press conference in London last year, leading researchers had warned of the catastrophic consequences to parts of the UK through a combination of severe storms and high tides.

Criticising government cuts to national funding for flood defences, the researchers had warned that areas like Hull, Portsmouth and the Thames Gateway were particularly high risk.

Referring to the budget cuts, Professor Penning-Rowsell said, “We see self-inflicted hazard in this country, just as we see self-inflicted hazard in other parts of the world. Risk is not an act of god; it’s an act of humans. Flood defence planning should not be subject of political machinations and varying budgets.”

The most expensive flood protection in the UK is the Thames Barrier in London, which was built in order to protect the financial and stock market area of the City of London from flooding and to ensure the economic stability of the capital. It cost £534 million (£1.3 billion at 2001 prices). Since 1982, the barrier has been raised over 100 times and it is raised every month for testing. According to one estimate, after a dredger accidentally crashed into one of the barriers in 1997, a flood of London would result in damage costing around £13 billion.

However, even when there are such enormous sums at stake government policy today is dictated by short-term expediency. Of paramount importance is the demand of the major corporations for ever greater cuts in public spending in order to lower taxes, coupled with the desire to take advantage of the housing boom that has encouraged widespread building on flood plains.

Warning of the consequences in London, Penning-Rowsell told the conference that extensive flooding in the capital could be caused by rainfall alone. Intense thunderstorms could cause the drainage system to fail, leading to a rapid rise in water levels and significant loss of life in a city with a high proportion of basement accommodation.

One year on the situation in Yorkshire and Hull points to the prescience of this warning.



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