More devastating floods hit China

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Parts of China, especially along the eastern Huai River, have had some of the heaviest rainfalls in 50 years. Continuous rain since mid-June has resulted in widespread flooding, affecting over 119 million people. Anhui, Sichuan and Hubei are the worst-hit provinces.

At least 3.6 million people have been evacuated, over one million houses have been damaged and another 452,000 destroyed. It is estimated that at least 7.87 million hectares of farmland have been ruined. Economic losses are estimated at $US6.9 billion, but are expected to rise.

More than 650 people have been killed so far this flood season. Last weekend alone, storms killed 17 in four provinces. Last Wednesday, a three-hour rainstorm in Jinan, the capital of Shangdon province, killed at least 34 people. Many died from electric shocks or drowned in cars that were swept away. Meanwhile, in Henan province, 69 coal miners were trapped underground when rainwater flooded a pit.

Even in the normally arid northwestern province of Xinjiang, at least 32 people died in a flood caused by heavy rains last week. The official Xinhua news agency reported that 48 Xinjiang herdsmen and 13,000 goats were stranded for two days on a mountain after a landslide cut paths. Last Wednesday, 33 villages in Yinshang county of Anhui province were hit by a tornado that uprooted 100,000 trees, large areas of crops and houses. It caused economic losses of $2.9 million.

In eastern China, the authorities projected that the Huai River—the country's third longest river—is retreating after staying at dangerously high levels since early July. Some 268,000 people in Anhui, Hunan and Jingshu, including 8,000 troops, were mobilised to safeguard dykes that still face the danger of collapse. Hundreds of thousands of displaced rural residents, whose homes were deliberately flooded in order to protect urban centres, still cannot return home.

Water Resources Minister Chen Lei warned that continued rain in catchment areas could cause further flooding. He noted that some 40 percent of the country's 80,000 reservoirs are in danger of bursting their banks. Last week Wuhan, the provincial capital of Hubei and a city of 9 million, issued a warning over the dangerously high water levels of the Hanjiang River, a tributary of the Yangtze. In Hubei, heavy rains affected 1.39 million people in 13 counties last weekend, with 100,700 hectares of crops damaged.

In southwestern Guizhou province, the water levels in many smaller rivers exceeded the danger limit after last week's rain. Last Wednesday, one person was killed in a landslide in the province. More than 3,000 people were evacuated in Pingtang county after rising waters stranded 10,000 people. Downpours since late June have caused serious landslides and flooding in the southwestern province of Sichuan, killing at least 42 people.

In Anhui Province, one of China's poorest, more than 20 million people had been affected by floods by mid-July, leaving at least 30 dead and causing the evacuation of over half a million. The province has been among the worst-hit by this season's floods, with estimated damage of at least $1.6 billion.

In the first two weeks of July, six flood reserve areas had been deliberately submerged. Emergency workers breached dykes in a bid to ease pressure on the Huai River. Villagers living inside the walls of the Shiyaowan dyke were evacuated, with officials using sirens and troops to round up about 10,000 residents to take them to higher ground.

Many have lost almost everything. One local farmer, Chen Guoqin, told *China Daily* on July 18 that her family had almost no crop this year. "The flour, harvested before the flood and left from last year, can barely feed us till the end of the year. The chance of replanting is pretty dim and too late. I am wondering if my husband and I should join my children and make a living in relatively developed eastern cities."

Li Ling, a 32-year-old mother of three, was relocated along with tens of thousands of other families from the Mengwa buffer zone a week earlier. After losing her crop, she said her family had to make do with the grain left over

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from last year. “I haven’t bought any meat for two months”, Li said, adding that she was still waiting for compensation for her losses due to the release of water by a hydrological station.

Rising waters in and around Dongting Lake since late June have resulted in a plague of rats, estimated to number two billion. The area flooded after the Three Gorges Dam was opened to relieve pressure from the heavy rains. The water flooded the rat burrows triggering a mass migration.

The rat plague has destroyed rice, corn, cotton and other crops. Villagers atttempted to halt the influx by clubbing rats, setting traps, digging ditches and laying poison. Aside from the loss of crops, there are concerns about disease. Tonnes of dead rats have been found in ditches and along the lake’s banks. In Hunan province, officials are raising $790,000 to build a 40 km, one-metre-high fence to prevent rat invasions.

Although the Chinese government has provided some immediate relief for victims, the recurrence of flood disasters virtually every year is the product of a lack of planning, infrastructure and funds to maintain and extend flood control mechanisms. The government’s focus has been on the economically developed eastern coastal provinces. The interior rural provinces are regarded simply as sources of cheap labour, and, during the flood seasons, a convenient buffer to protect the important major centres.

At the same time, scientists are warning that this year’s heavy rain and floods are abnormal and may have been caused by changing weather patterns resulting from global warming. While parts of the country have been inundated, a heat wave has hit seven southern and southwestern Chinese provinces in recent weeks, affecting 200 million people. In Jiangxi, Hunan and Fujian, one million residents face shortages of drinking water because of a severe drought.

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