

Devastating floods sweep across Africa

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Torrential downpours over the last few months have caused major floods across Africa, submerging whole towns and washing away bridges, farms and schools. According to the United Nations, at least 1.5 million people in 18 countries have been affected by the worst downpours in 30 years, with hundreds of thousands of people displaced and nearly 300 killed.

The UN and aid agencies are concerned about a rising risk of disease outbreaks, particularly water-borne disease such as cholera and malaria.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have warned that a massive aid effort is needed. Niels Scott, operations coordinator for the Red Cross in Africa, said in a statement that emergency food, shelter and clean water supplies were needed, as well as pre-positioned stocks, flood-proof wells and other measures to prepare for wider flooding.

So far the disaster has received very little coverage in the western press, and calls for aid have been met with a muted response.

The extreme weather conditions have been blamed by some analysts on a phenomenon known as *la Niña* where oceans cool faster, thus causing the rainy season to come earlier. Lawrence Flint, a researcher for the Dakar-based NGO, Environmental Development Action in the Third World, says the extremes in temperature could have roots in global warming.

“People are having to cope with floods that are higher and bigger than they are used to, and people cope with periods of droughts that are bigger than they are used to. They cope with extremes of temperature—extremes of heat and extremes of cold. The weather is becoming unpredictable. It is the unpredictability aspect that is hitting people hardest,” Flint explained.

The weather is forecast to get worse, with heavier rainfall on the way in the coming weeks. Its full intensity is likely to be felt by mid-November in most regions and will only start to subside in mid or late December. Famine in many parts of the continent is forecast to go on up to 2009.

The floods have largely affected countries in a band across western, central and eastern Africa, with Ghana and Uganda the worst hit.

The UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that 500,000 people across 12 countries in West Africa have been affected—Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo, with about half those affected living in Ghana.

“Conditions are ripe for an infestation,” OCHA’s Elisabeth Byrs warned, with additional fears of swarms of crop-eating locusts in both Mali and Niger.

The head of the Red Cross for West and Central Africa, Alasan Senghore, says that disasters like floods hit hardest in poor regions where people have nothing to fall back on if they lose their houses or become sick.

Ghana has declared a state of emergency across the north, the country’s traditional breadbasket, with three regions named as an official disaster zone after whole towns and villages were submerged. Torrential rains between July and August have led to major flooding which has killed at least 18 people, displaced a quarter of a million and destroyed thousands of homes and major bridges. Some 112mm of rain reportedly fell in two days in the town of Sandema, where three people were reported killed. Many of the victims are farmers whose crops have been destroyed.

“It is a humanitarian disaster. People have nowhere to go. Some of them are just hanging out there waiting for help to come at a point,” Information Minister Oboshie-Sai Cofie said. Many people have been forced to take up refuge in trees and others have had to be rescued by boat.

The Red Cross has launched an initial appeal for relief aid funding of \$2.1 million for emergency supplies in Ghana and neighbouring Togo, where 20 people are dead and another 66,000 displaced. Flooding has also washed away 100 bridges and seven dams in Togo and destroyed more than 46 schools, causing a delay of one month in the beginning of the school year across the country.

In Burkina Faso, the worst floods since 1954 have destroyed many dams and wiped out thousands of hectares of maize and millet farmland. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the government have calculated that some 23,000 farming households have suffered, with an estimated 160,000 people affected.

In Niger, serious flooding has caused widespread damage to infrastructure such as agricultural production, schools, health care facilities, roads, bridges, water supply systems, power and telephone lines and housing. According to the National Early Warning System three people have died and approximately 14,000 have been affected, including 2,600 children under five years of age.

In Benin, tens of thousands of people have been displaced and at least 50 villages have been destroyed by floods, with crops, granaries and livestock destroyed according to the NGO Plan International.

In Mali, at least 32,000 people have been hit by the floods, in Liberia, some 20,000 people and in Gambia, 300 people were hit by flooding. In Nigeria, 68 people have died and 50,000 are affected, according to the Red Cross.

In Mauritania, 30,000 people have lost their homes in the city of Tintane with at least two dead. Additionally thousands of families in the southern regions of Gorgol and Assaba, have been affected. Health centres, banks, pharmacies, mosques and the water decontamination systems have all been flooded out.

In Cameroon intense rains from July onwards have left at least six people dead, an estimated 1,220 homeless, and swept away 225 granaries, and four bridges.

In eastern Chad floods are hampering efforts by aid agencies to help tens of thousands of Sudanese refugees and 170,000 Chadian internally displaced persons. Several refugee camps near the border with Sudan's Darfur region have been cut off including Goz Amir, which houses some 230,000 Sudanese refugees.

In East Africa severe weather going back to July has badly affected Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Eritrea, Rwanda and Uganda. Hailstorms and landslides have compounded the problems.

In Uganda the heaviest rainfall for 35 years has triggered floods in mostly eastern and northern regions, causing the government to declare a state of emergency, with local NGO, the Pilgrim, estimating that 200,000 people are in urgent need of food. Hundreds of thousands have fled the devastating floods with an estimated 400,000, mainly subsistence farmers, having lost their livelihoods after roads were washed away and 600,000 hectares of crops were flooded. The floods have so far killed 21 people, including two children who died from malaria.

"There is no water to drink and we are already being overwhelmed by people with cases of diarrhoea and malaria," Asege Florence, a local medical worker, said. Accessibility and lack of food is a major problem because all the stored grains and dried foods have been submerged in water.

The Red Cross has launched appeals for relief aid funding for 290,000 people displaced by floods in Uganda totalling \$7.2 million, whilst the WFP has called for \$65 million to feed 1.7 million people, many of them already displaced by the war in the north. Other UN agencies in Uganda have also launched a \$43 million floods appeal.

The floods have caused a major break down of infrastructure with heavy rains washing away roads and more than 30 bridges in the Teso sub-region. Pit latrines have also collapsed, infecting the rising waters with faecal matter and raising fears for an outbreak of water borne diseases such as cholera and dysentery.

"The problem is getting worse by the hour," said Uganda's Minister for Relief and Disaster Preparedness Musa Ecweru, who told journalists that the government lacked sufficient resources to handle the crisis. "Resources are not adequate for a problem, of such a magnitude. We are overwhelmed. We are trying to humanly do whatever we can do. The heavens are opening wider and we need everybody's support," Ecweru said. "In some places, the water is the same colour as the earth so when you look at it you think it is a field then you realise it's water," he added.

In Ethiopia floods in the north have affected 183,000 people and displaced 42,000 according to the UN World Food Programme. Several health clinics and schools, a food grain store and other infrastructure have been washed away or severely damaged, and villages have been inundated with crocodile-infested flood waters.

The Red Cross reported that at least 63 people had died from

acute watery diarrhoea in the flood-hit Oromia region, with a total of 3,680 cases reported last month. They earlier said in a statement that "some 4,000 head of livestock have been drowned or washed away, and 34,000 hectares of land have been damaged".

In Rwanda 15 people have died after torrential rains ravaged the districts of Nyabihu and Rubavu in Western Province. Thousands of homes, and hundreds of hectares of potato plantations were also destroyed.

Charles Ngirabatware, the Mayor of Nyabihu, blamed the heavy rains on the destruction of Gishwati Forest in the north-western part of the country, which is one of the most severely deforested areas in Rwanda. Formerly covering 21,000 hectares before 1981, it had been reduced to only 600 hectares by 2002.

Floods in Somalia's Middle Shabelle region 30 kilometres north of the capital, Mogadishu, have affected thousands of people, displaced hundreds, and destroyed eleven villages and many hectares of farmland when the Shabelle River burst its banks after heavy rainfall in neighbouring Ethiopia caused the rivers downstream to flood.

In Sudan, refugees returning to the south following the civil war had to flee their homes again through waist-high waters in what the government called "the worst floods in living memory." So far, 119 people have died and over 250,000 have been made homeless since the flooding began in mid-June.

In western Kenya floods have displaced at least 20,000 people, marooned another 6,000 and killed 12. Last year floods killed dozens of people and displaced 700,000 across the country.

Western governments have largely managed to ignore the growing humanitarian disaster sweeping Africa. Only a massive injection of funds into early warning systems and the development of an adequate infrastructure can have any chance of stopping such disasters having a devastating impact in future years.

That Africa has been hit so badly confirms the warning made in April of this year by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on the impact of climate change on agriculture and food production. Their report noted that developing countries would be amongst the most affected by climate change with more frequent drought, floods and resultant crop damage, water shortages and disease.



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