US: Officials warn of more levee breaks as Midwest flooding spreads

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Flood warnings are being posted on the Mississippi River north of St. Louis, Missouri, and the US Army Corps of Engineers is warning that rising water could overtop as many as 27 levees.

A levee breach on the Illinois side of the Mississippi across from Burlington, Iowa, flooded farms and homes and forced the closure of a bridge. Meanwhile, National Guard troops, prison inmates and volunteers worked to shore up levees with sandbags on both sides of the Mississippi. Ron Fournier, a spokesman for the Army Corps of Engineers in Iowa, said there was no way of predicting if the levees would break.

Floods have already led to deaths and evacuations in a number of Midwestern states. Eastern Iowa has been hardest hit. Some 36,000 Iowans have been evacuated or forced out of their homes, and losses may exceed the $2.1 billion suffered in the catastrophic floods of 1993. A breached levee led to the flooding of more than 400 blocks of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and the evacuation of thousands of residents. Damage to the state's highways, bridges and railroads is already reported to be worse than in 1993.

Losses to agriculture are expected to be massive. Iowa and Illinois, the center of the flooding, produce about one third of US corn and soybeans. As a consequence, corn prices are hitting record highs on commodity markets.

Storms and heavy rains have pounded the Midwest in recent weeks. Since May 25, tornadoes and flooding have left at least two dozen people dead. The floods have closed highways and rail lines and halted barge traffic on the Mississippi River, a key transportation artery.

The widespread failure of levees along the upper Mississippi and its tributaries is reminiscent of the Katrina disaster. This year's flooding, while exceptionally severe in some areas, was neither unprecedented nor unpredictable. The failure of state and federal authorities to ensure adequate flood protection of large urban areas and key facilities such as water-treatment plants amounts to gross negligence. It is a product of the lack of coordination and planning endemic to capitalism, compounded by the general neglect of infrastructure over the last several decades.

Investment in infrastructure is near historic lows as a percentage of gross domestic product. For example, according to one report, the US spends two thirds less in real terms on civil engineering projects such as dams and levees than it did in 1960.

The bulk of damage from flooding to urban areas and farmland is largely the consequence of inadequate or poorly constructed and maintained levees. Levee failures led to the devastation in Cedar Rapids and extensive damage to other Iowa towns. In Iowa City, a levee break flooded the University of Iowa campus and forced the evacuation of hundreds of homes. In Columbus Junction, on the Iowa River, a levee breach left the town under 10 feet of water; and in the state capital of Des Moines, a levee failure led to the flooding of a residential neighborhood.

Last summer, a Corps of Engineers report, yet to be acted on, indicated that the levees protecting St. Louis were suffering from underground seepage and that pumps, drain gates and other equipment needed replacing.

Cleanup from the flood will be long and difficult. In many areas, floodwaters are contaminated with sewage and farm chemicals. "If you drink this water and live, tell me about it," said one Des Moines County official. "You have no idea. It is very, very wise to stay out of it. It's as dangerous as anything."

In Cedar Rapids, hazardous conditions forced the city

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to stop permitting residents from returning to their homes. As a consequence, tensions among evacuees have been running high; one frustrated man tried to run a police barricade outside one neighborhood.

The high levels of contamination make it unlikely that residents will be able to salvage much from their possessions once they are permitted to return. “I probably won’t keep anything, it won’t be worth it,” said one evacuee.

Residents of the afflicted areas face a precarious and uncertain future. The pledge by President Bush to visit flood-hit areas on Thursday probably did little to allay concerns of evacuees, given the failure of the government to provide funds to rebuild hurricane-devastated New Orleans and other Gulf Coast cities.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) limits grants to uninsured homeowners to $28,000 to be used to restore homes to safe, sanitary conditions. However, the money cannot be used to restore homes to pre-flood conditions, and in many cases, homes will have to be torn down and completely rebuilt.

Meanwhile, the Red Cross reports that its disaster-relief fund is already totally depleted. The agency said that donations are down due to the mortgage crisis and rising food and housing prices.

The flooding of millions of acres of prime agricultural farmland could seriously impact global food prices, as corn went above $8 a bushel for the first time at the Chicago Board of Trade. Corn is also trading at a record high in Europe. Estimates are that 3 million acres of corn are under water and another 2 million acres could not be planted.

In Iowa, the US Department of Agriculture reported that 9 percent of the state’s corn crop and 8 percent of the soybean crop were flooded. The US is the world’s largest exporter of corn and soybeans, and Iowa is the largest producing state.

According to a report in the June 17 edition of the *Wall Street Journal*, the Midwest flood could lead to further price increases in basic food staples such as meat, bread, eggs and breakfast cereals.

It quoted Fiona Boal, a food industry analyst, who said, “The US consumer has gotten used to cheap, affordable food. Now the goalposts are moving.” She predicted US food prices would increase between 7 and 9 percent this year. Food prices rose 4 percent in 2007.

Meat production is expected to decrease significantly as farmers sell off poultry, cattle and hogs due to higher feed prices.

The harvest is now expected to be 6 percent lower than earlier estimates. This takes place at a time when world demand for corn is growing, due in part to the expansion of the ethanol industry.

The reduction of the corn crop may lead to a fall in US agricultural imports, affecting the US balance of trade. It also threatens to deplete US corn reserves, which are expected to hit a 13-year low.

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