

Millions affected by flooding in India and Nepal

Official neglect

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Severe flooding in India and Nepal over the past fortnight has affected millions of people and left hundreds of thousands homeless, with little in the way of assistance from government authorities.

The worst hit area is the eastern Indian state of Bihar where hundreds of villages were inundated when a two-kilometre breach occurred in a badly-maintained embankment on the Kosi River, adjoining the India-Nepal border, on August 19. The Kosi, which is a major tributary of the Ganges River, carved out a new course and deluged huge areas of land.

Mahesh Puri, a UNICEF emergency specialist, told the *Washington Post*: “The river changed its course and inundated areas where people have not seen floods in 50 years. They were completely unprepared. What is worse is that many of these people will never be able to go back to their homes because the river has changed course. Now there are streams where there were none before.”

Indian officials told the media that work to fix the dam and try to divert the river back to its normal course could not begin until the end of the rainy season in October and might take until early next year.

UN agencies estimated that three million people have been affected by the disaster. Half a million have fled to dry ground, while hundreds of thousands are still awaiting rescue. In neighbouring Nepal, at least 1,000 homes have been destroyed and around 60,000 people displaced.

Bihar is one of India’s poorest and most populous states. Some 37 million of its population of 90 million live below the poverty line. Annual per capita income is just \$US160. An estimated 1,000 villages in 16 districts in Bihar have been submerged by the floodwaters. Madhepura, Saharsa, Supaul, Araria and Katihar, which border eastern Nepal, are the most badly affected districts.

The *Washington Post* reported the death toll at 117 on Wednesday, but officials fear that the number of dead will rise sharply as the water recedes. Last Friday, a boat

involved in rescue operations capsized drowning 20 persons. On Tuesday, 15 people were drowned in similar incidents—10 in one boat and five in another.

Aid agencies have accused the government of playing down the death toll. “By not counting those gone missing, the government estimates not only result in inadequate compensation and rehabilitation processes, but also underplay the need for rescue and relief,” Action Aid adviser Dr. P.V. Unnikrishnan said.

Many refugees fled with only the clothes they were wearing. At least half a million are still stranded two weeks after the disaster began. People are crowded on rooftops and trees or on small strips of high ground. The media has reported survivors desperately appealing to overcrowded military rescue boats and helicopters for help.

Many of the survivors are crowded into makeshift camps set up by the government and aid agencies, or living in temples. They lack food and clean drinking water, as well as basic sanitation and health care. Aid agencies have warned of the outbreak of waterborne diseases.

The UN has warned that “the heat, combined with limited supplies of safe drinking water and poor hygiene conditions, poses a great risk of water- and vector-borne diseases.” In one camp at a school in Saharsa district, a nurse reported: “We have had 35 cases of diarrhoea and fever today out of 800 people in the camp.”

After flying over the affected area, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared the disaster to be a “national calamity”. But the government has announced a limited aid package of \$US230 million and released 125,000 tonnes of grain for relief. So far food has reached only a small number of those affected.

In response to criticisms of its limited rescue operation, the government increased the number of troops involved to 3,000 and dispatched several navy and air force teams to the flooded areas.

Angry survivors accused the government of leaving people

stranded in remote villages. Bhushan told the *Independent*: “They should send more boats. How long can we survive without food and water? We are worried about our children and womenfolk—they should think about us.”

One villager, Bijender, told reporters: “We’ve lost our homes, we’ve lost our clothes, we’ve lost everything.” Another said: “We are taking our children and leaving and we don’t even know where we are going.” Angry villagers have hijacked rescue vessels and looted food, water and other essentials.

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After floods in 1954, India and Nepal agreed on plans to dam the Kosi River, which were completed in 1959. India undertook to maintain the dams and embankments, while both countries agreed to continually remove silt, which builds up constantly.

N.K. Singh, chairman of the Bihar planning commission, acknowledged in an article in the *Times of India* on September 1 that the temporary embankments were meant to last for 25 years. Nearly 50 years after construction was completed, successive Indian governments have taken no further action to build permanent embankments or implement other flood prevention measures.

Nepali Foreign Minister Upendra Yadav was quick to point the finger at India, declaring: “There have been some shortcomings in the maintenance of the embankment”. He said India was bound to provide compensation, rescue support and rehabilitation services to affected Nepalese.

Indian officials attempted to evade any responsibility by claiming the floods were unprecedented. “This has never happened before. How can you suggest that we could plan for this? Tell me which state can cope with hundreds of thousands of people losing everything,” Prataya Amrit, a disaster management official in Bihar, told reporters.

Writing to the *rediff.com* website, Himanshu Thakkur, coordinator for the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People, accused the government of ignoring the warning signs. “The pressure on the breached site of the embankment was apparent from August 5 onwards. Even at this stage, if the government of India had used all its powers to ensure proper maintenance, the disaster could have been averted.”

It seems that there were even earlier warning signals. According to the UN-funded *ReliefWeb*, early rains in the Ganges’ catchment areas in May caused concern among aid agencies.

Adding to the scale of the disaster is the vast expansion of

the population living in flood-prone areas of Bihar over the past half century. Three years ago, Eklavya Prasad pointed out in a book, *Civil Society*, that the vulnerable area of Bihar had nearly trebled from 2.5 million hectares in 1952, when there was 160 kilometres of embankment, to 6.9 million hectares in 2002, with 3,3430 kilometres of embankment. An estimated three-quarters of the population of northern Bihar are now at risk from floods every year during the monsoon.

Other areas of the Indian subcontinent have been hit by serious flooding. On Tuesday, it was reported one million people have been displaced by floods in the northeastern Indian state of Assam that have affected 16 of 27 districts. The death toll on Tuesday stood at 15. Officials estimated that 1,346 villages were inundated after the Brahmaputra River breached its banks in 20 places.

In neighbouring Bangladesh, about 125,0000 people have been marooned as floods submerged 20 of the country’s northern and central districts. Last year, flooding killed about 1,000 people in these areas.

Every year during the monsoon season, millions of people throughout South Asia suffer flooding. Even before the catastrophe in Bihar, nearly 1,000 people in India had been killed. Last year the number of flood victims was 800.

Attempts are regularly made by politicians and the media to dismiss such tragedies as unavoidable natural disasters. While natural forces are certainly involved, the real responsibility rests with governments and the profit system for failing to take even basic measures to prevent or minimise flooding and provide adequate assistance for the victims.

The yearly flood toll is an indictment not only of governments in South Asia, but of the major powers as well. In response to the latest catastrophe in Bihar, the EU and the US have offered a pittance in aid to India—just \$US100,000 and \$3 million, respectively. In a social order that puts profit ahead of social need, the last thing that any of these governments are concerned about is funding a scientific plan to put an end to the death and misery caused by flooding and other disasters.



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