

Severe tropical storm strikes eastern India

Shree Haran
17 April 2010

A severe tropical storm struck the eastern Indian states of Bihar, West Bengal, and Assam, as well as neighbouring country Bangladesh, on Tuesday night, destroying an estimated 100,000 homes and killing at least 136 people. The death toll will almost certainly rise further, with others believed to be buried under debris. Many of the survivors are yet to receive assistance, triggering protests in several areas.

The Meteorological Department in Bihar reported winds of 100 kilometres per hour. Tornados also developed within the storm. Trees were uprooted, telephone and electricity lines snapped and mud huts swept away. The storm, which hit at night while most people were sleeping, was the deadliest in the region since Cyclone Aliya swept Bangladesh and eastern India in May last year. As many as 500,000 people are believed to have been affected by Tuesday's storm.

Bihar, India's poorest state, was the worst affected. The confirmed death toll has reached 83, and about 80,000 homes were destroyed in five of the state's districts. In Purnia, a rural area, 39 people were killed including 17 children. In Araria, another rural area, 33 died including 11 children. The district magistrate of Araria, Uday Kumar, told reporters that "while the exact number of people rendered homeless would be ascertained by Saturday, 25,000-30,000 people were affected".

Most of the homes swept away in Araria and Purnia were the thatched huts of the rural poor. Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi told the media: "While tin-roofs secured by bamboo shoots withstood the fury of the storm, people sleeping under the mud-thatched or asbestos roofs were caught unawares. Unfortunately, a large number of the victims were women and children."

Many of those affected across Bihar were still recovering and rebuilding from catastrophic floods in August 2008 that affected more than two million people. The storm has once again highlighted the plight of poor in India. About 55 percent of people in Bihar live below poverty line, according to official estimates. In West Bengal, 27 percent of population is living below poverty line of one US dollar a day.

In West Bengal's North Dinajpur district, Chief Secretary Ashok Mohan Chakrabarti said that 42 bodies were recovered from the debris. "Ninety-five percent of homes have been destroyed in the affected villages in North Dinajpur district in West Bengal," Joba Bhattacharya, an ActionAid partner in the area, told reporters yesterday. "Women and children are camping in open space. Many have very little clothing on them and need food."

According to AFP, four people died and 500 families lost their homes in Assam state. In Bangladesh, two people were killed and 12,000 houses damaged.

Survivors reported terrible stories about the death of loved ones and the destruction of their property and crops and cattle. Namita Biswas, a West Bengal housewife, told the media that her husband was killed when a tree crushed their home as they slept.

Nazimul, a resident of Lukani village in Bihar's Purnea district, was sleeping in his one-roomed mud house together with his wife and five children aged between five months and 13 years, when the storm struck. After his home's tin roof was blown away, Nazimul was able to save his children by throwing them into the open, but his wife Sakeera was crushed under a wall. "She died despite my best efforts,"

Nazimal told reporters.

State governments have announced compensation for the families of victims, and promised rescue operations and relief materials for affected people. However, many of those affected have not received any assistance. “There has been no distribution of aid in Bihar yet,” Sanjay Pandey, convenor of the Inter-Agency Group (made up of several international aid agencies), told Reuters AlertNet yesterday. “I think it will happen on Monday.”

Relief efforts have been held up by the rundown infrastructure in the affected regions. Uprooted trees and downed power and telephone lines have further frustrated attempts to coordinate the rapid provision of aid. Several villages reported that they received no prior warning of the storm from meteorological officials.

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar made a show of touring part of the affected area in a helicopter. He claimed that relief was being speedily organised. In reality, many of the worst hit villages remain entirely isolated. The Indian *Telegraph* reported from Lukani village in Bihar’s Purnea district on Thursday. “Not a single government official was visible at the village today,” the newspaper noted. Sikandar Mia, a 70-year-old resident, said: “Not to speak of district officials, even the village head has not visited us so far.”

The West Bengal state government of the Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), announced compensation of just 10,000 rupees (\$US225) for rebuilding completely destroyed houses, 2,500 for repairing partially damaged houses, and 200,000 rupees for the family members of those killed. The Bihar state government also announced compensation, 150,000 rupees for families who lost a loved one in the storm. These grossly inadequate sums underscore the contempt with which Indian authorities hold the impoverished people affected by the storm.

The Left Front government in West Bengal deployed riot police against protesting residents of Karandighi and Hematabad villages in the northern part of the state. “Thousands of villagers staged angry protests in front

of government offices demanding more relief materials and assaulted officials when they came to open the offices,” West Bengal relief minister Mortaza Hossain said. “Some protesters even scaled the boundary wall of a civic body office in Karandighi, one of the worst affected villages, broke open the godown (storage area) and looted tarpaulin sheets and other relief materials.”

Jabbar Sheikh, a resident of Karandighi, told AFP: “Villagers are angry as the relief material is very inadequate and in places no relief has reached as yet.”

In another West Bengal village, Rampur, a local journalist told the news agency that “thousands of people had surrounded government offices and schools, shouting in frustration at the slow rescue and relief operation”.

In the state’s Uttar Dinajpur district, police yesterday dispersed a group of protestors who blocked a state highway for several hours. The people had lost their homes in the storm and were reportedly demanding the immediate supply of polythene sheets to provide their families with basic shelter. On Thursday a truckload of the tarpaulins had been forcibly seized by desperate local residents as they were being unloaded at a government storehouse.

The protests are a symptom of deep-seated resentment towards governments and politicians—state and national—who invariably respond to such disasters with empty professions of concern, but provide little or no assistance and take no measures to forestall the next catastrophe.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact