

Heavy flooding creates further havoc in China

Zac Hambides
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China's worst flooding in a decade has already left nearly 3,900 people dead or missing. This week, China's northeast was also hit, resulting in the relocation of more than a quarter of a million residents.

Torrential rain caused the Yalu River, which borders China and North Korea, to overflow. The river reached 2.35 metres above the danger mark—the second highest level since the records began in 1934.

Last Saturday, floodwaters breached a dyke in Dandong city, according to the state-run news agency Xinhua, killing at least four people, with one person missing. About 3,000 houses were destroyed and 5,000 damaged. The city of 2.4 million people had only limited water supplies in most districts and some water was not drinkable. Flooding cut some communication links.

An estimated 202,000 people were affected in Dandong, where at least 195 industrial and mining companies halted operations. Throughout Liaoning Province, flooding affected 457,000 people and caused at least \$US112 million in economic losses. According to the latest reports, floodwaters were subsiding and clean-up operations beginning.

North Korea has also been affected. According to the North Korean Central News Agency, the rural communities surrounding the city of Sinuiju, as well as parts of the city itself, have become “completely inundated”. About 5,000 people have been relocated. Traffic in parts of Sinuiju became “paralysed”. Photographs outside Sinuiju show water stretching to the horizon, with a few scattered rooftops as the only refuge.

Other areas of northwest and southwest China have

been hit this week by further heavy rain. In Sichuan province, flooding since August 12 has caused economic losses of \$419 million, as of Tuesday. The floods have destroyed 215 reservoirs and disrupted the lives of 9.4 million people, many of whom were still struggling to recover from the massive 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Provincial authorities have provided only \$1.7 million in relief to flood victims.

As of Monday, at least 42 people were dead in northwestern province of Gansu after two weeks of heavy rain. The provincial government estimated 30,000 houses had collapsed and 110,000 were damaged, along with 60,000 hectares of crops. The latest flooding follows a horrific mudslide that killed 1,434 people in Gansu's Zhouqu district on August 8. At least 330 people are still missing.

In Zhouqu, authorities banned residents this week from further searches. “The bodies have begun to rot after being buried for two weeks. Searching the debris risks an epidemic outbreak,” a local government spokesman declared.

Relief efforts have been inadequate. The government has relocated 1,700 residents, whose homes were destroyed in the landslide, to a “resettlement area,” where they might be forced to stay in tents through the winter. Hundreds are living in schools but must find new shelter before the new school term begins.

Last Saturday, Premier Wen Jiabao paid a second visit to Zhouqu, in a bid to quell public anger. He ordered the replacement of arable land along the Bailong River with forests, and banned logging in certain areas in order to prevent further landslides. Well aware of local resentment over official corruption, Wen called for “public supervision” of reconstruction funds

for the region.

Residents have made scathing criticisms of the inadequacy of preventive measures arranged by the government. In particular, mudslide barriers are termed “tofu projects” by locals, according to the *South China Morning Post* on Monday. “Only the surface was solid, otherwise it was empty,” Liu Yuanmu, a villager, explained. Another local, Liu Quingping, pointing to the contents of a collapsed four-metre-high dam, said: “Apart from these stones, there was almost no cement inside the structure, not to mention steel reinforcement ... they were like ticking time bombs hanging over our heads.”

After returning from the site, Professor Chen Ningsheng of the Chinese Academy of Science confirmed the sentiments of locals as “basically true”. He told the *South China Morning Post* on Monday: “The building quality of these dams was so bad. They were too flimsy to hold the massive avalanche of rocks and mud rolling down from the hills ... Apparently there are some problems with the design ... For instance, I can’t find any sign of auxiliary dams, which are normally built beside the main dams to support them—though it could be that [the auxiliary dams] were completely destroyed by the mudslides.”

In its disaster prevention plans, the local government has listed Zhouqu for the past two years as a particularly dangerous area for mudslides. Yet its detection station was unprepared for the mudslide and failed to warn of its approach.

The dams or barriers were built in late 1990s after two geologists warned that the region was prone to massive landslides. Their recommendation was to build 10 mudslide dams and a number of sluices above Zhouqu to protect villages and the old town. However, according to a local official, Feng Huling, who took part in the building of the dams, they lacked funds from the outset. He told the *Southern Weekend* newspaper: “The project manager contracted out the construction of each dam for 100,000 yuan [about \$US15,000]. That means we would need more than a million yuan to finish the 10 dams. But the Zhouqu county government never paid us that money.”

The official neglect of poor counties like Zhouqu contrasts sharply with the huge amounts of money invested in dams to generate electricity for the country’s industry. China currently produces 200 million kilowatts of electricity, but has to increase that figure to 300 million kilowatts by 2015. This means building further hydropower stations and dams, which currently number 86,000, and are funded by the state. The chaotic construction of hydro-electricity dams in the Zhouqu area—rather than adequate protective barriers—contributed to the danger of mudslides and landslides.



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