

Floods hit Germany, Poland and Czech Republic

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The floods in Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic have claimed the lives of at least ten people. In the Czech Republic and Poland, people are still missing. In many places the damage runs into millions, while the total is not yet known.

After heavy and persistent rain and a dam breach in Poland, the river Neisse rose rapidly last weekend causing the worst flooding since the so-called flood of the century in 2002. Numerous other rivers and streams have also broken their banks. The areas worst affected by the flooding include the cities of Görlitz and Zittau in Germany and Bogatynia in Poland.

Although water levels have been falling since the end of last week, and the clean-up work has been partially completed, further flooding is still possible along the Spree and Neisse. The German meteorological service expects further heavy rain and rising water levels in the next few days.

Following the disasters in recent years, the current floods show that the governments of the countries affected have still not made adequate preparations for such events, not to mention establishing a system of cross-border cooperation.

There are a number of reasons for the constantly recurring floods, such as the artificial straightening of rivers and the building of new developments on flood plains, preventing natural drainage. In some regions subsidies were awarded to those prepared to move into areas drenched by floods in 2002, despite the fact that the authorities failed to build barriers capable of preventing renewed flooding.

According to the German Federation for Environment and Nature Conservation (BUND), the delay in the implementation of national and European legislation concerning flood control has worsened the impact of the current floods in Saxony. The BUND recommends,

“A general ban on building in flood plains and greater restrictions on potential agricultural use”. State governments have resisted this at the behest of the construction industry.

For thousands of residents, the damage caused by the floods is enormous, and as in 2002, criticism is now growing about unreliable warnings or the lack of any warnings in some cases. For example, following the dam breach in Poland, settlements close to the border were evacuated. Other villages lying along the river did not even know about the dangers.

“People living close to the Neisse sat in their homes without knowing anything about the threat. At that time, 35 kilometres away in Zittau, an entire district of the town was sinking below the waters of the Neisse. After a dam breach, a flood wave travelled from neighbouring Poland overwhelming Görlitz,” *Focus Online* reported.

The various German state legislatures attempted to blame Poland for the lack of information and made other excuses to evade their own responsibility. Saxony interior minister Mark Ulbig (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) went so far as to state that, “the majority of people were satisfied” with the official response.

The floods have also had severe consequences in the Czech Republic. In northern Bohemia, around 2,000 people had to be evacuated, and at least five people died. Numerous roads, bridges and rail links will probably be impassable for months.

As the *Prague Post* reported, about 500 households are without electricity and gas in the affected areas. The electricity and gas suppliers have said it will take months for the supply to be restored. Moreover, hundreds of households are without fresh drinking water. First estimates put the damage at 5 billion Krone (\$266 million). Kveta Sirova, spokeswoman for the

Liberec region, told the *Prague Post* that the actual scale of the damage could not be quantified yet and would probably be far higher.

“The damage is huge and extensive. The biggest concerns among people are about their properties”, the paper quoted IT worker Michal Rohan from Hrádek nad Nisou near the German border. “Some have been insured, some have not—and those without insurance lost all they had”, he said.

Rohan said small businesses were particularly hard hit by the flood: “The companies located in lower part of Hrádek also face collapse, because some like Pragovka had all their machine storage areas over there, and it has all been destroyed.”

Like many others, he does not believe support will be forthcoming from the Czech government: “The government promises to give money after every flood, and nothing happens afterward”.

The past few years have seen devastating floods. In May and June this year, six people were killed in floods in Moravia. In 2009, eight of the country's 14 districts were affected. Fifteen people died, thousands were evacuated. In 2006, nine people died, including two small children. The worst flooding was in August 2002, when seventeen people were killed, and the damage amounted to 73 billion Krone (\$3.7 billion). There were also floods in 1997 and 1998.

While the previous government still deemed it necessary to help those affected, at least symbolically, the present government of Prime Minister Petr Necas is firmly resisting requests for assistance.

The 40 million Krone (\$2 million) that the government has put aside for the flood victims can only be regarded as a provocation.

Back in March, the transitional government of Jan Fischer plundered the three billion Krone disaster fund in order to finance the May elections. These funds were then lacking during floods that occurred in May of this year. The present Finance Minister Miroslav Kalousek absolutely refuses to replenish the fund.

To hide the criminal role of the political elite, Interior Minister Radek John has made the victims of the disaster into scapegoats. “In one village, people were warned in advance but did not listen and stayed in their homes, and later we had to save them with helicopters. And that costs us millions more”.

None of the central European governments have

provided the necessary funds to prepare for this disaster. The austerity measures being implemented across the continent exclude any possibility of marshalling the necessary resources to prevent such a catastrophe.



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