Hundreds dead in Brazilian flooding

Bill Van Auken
15 January 2011

The death toll from flooding and mudslides has risen past 500, with hundreds more missing, as Brazil confronts its worst ever natural disaster.

According to figures released by the Brazilian government Friday, the confirmed number of dead has risen to 536. Some 14,000 have been left homeless and many people are believed still buried by the wall of water and mud that engulfed entire homes and wiped out highways, power lines and water and sewage systems.

The mudslides were triggered by an intense downpour that began Tuesday night, dumping a month's worth of rain in just 24 hours on the highland Serrana region of the Brazilian state of Rio de Janeiro.

The government of the state of Rio de Janeiro dispatched units of military police to the area after reports of scattered looting. Access to food and drinking water has become increasingly difficult for the survivors of the devastation. Where food is to be found, prices have been raised by as much 500 percent.

Hardest hit were the towns of Nova Friburgo, Teresopolis and Petropolis, about 40-60 miles north of the coastal city of Rio de Janeiro.

Nova Friburgo was originally settled by Swiss immigrants, while Teresopolis began as a *quilombo*, or settlement created by escaped Afro-Brazilian slaves.

Petropolis, named for Dom Pedro II, the last emperor of Brazil, was the site of the royal family's summer palace. Its cooler temperatures attracted much of the Brazilian aristocracy seeking relief from Rio's summer heat.

All three towns are tourist destinations and include both luxury homes owned by Rio's elite and *favelas*, or slums, built by impoverished sections of workers.

“There was no way of telling which house would fall,” Fernanda Carvalho, a domestic worker, told the O Globo television network. “Rich and poor—everything was destroyed.”

As always, however, most hard hit were the region's poor. In the Camp Grande favela of Teresopolis, hundreds have died, buried in the mud, a resident told the daily *Estado de Sao Paulo*. The favela sits across from a mansion built by the Marinho family, the owners of the Globo media conglomerate, which was untouched by the disaster.

Rio de Janeiro's secretary of the environment, Carlos Minc, stressed that the scale of the disaster was still emerging, as rescuers have yet to reach remoter areas that have been cut off by the devastation.

“I believe the death toll is much higher than has so far been announced," he said "Many people died in their sleep. The mountainsides are coming down. The areas are very unstable.” Continuing heavy rain was forecast for the region through Saturday.

The mayor of Teresopolis, Jorge Mario Selacek, stressed that among the victims there were “many children and many old people” who were least able to fight the torrents of water and mud that carried them away.

A reporter for the *Guardian* described survivors searching at morgues for lost loved-ones, leafing through a notebook “filled with pictures of unidentified corpses, bloated, mud-soaked limbs and babies whose smooth faces had been frozen into peaceful gazes by their sudden deaths.”

More than 30 people also lost their lives in flooding that affected the states of Minas Gerais and Sao Paulo, where overflowing rivers inundated streets in Brazil's financial capital.

The mudslide is one of the 10 worst recorded internationally over the past century and has surpassed the death toll in what had previously been the worst natural disaster in Brazilian history, the 1967 flooding that brought the slopes of the Serra do Mar mountain range sliding down on the Sao Paulo beach town of Caraguatatuba, killing 437 people.

While the scale of death and destruction may be unprecedented, disasters of this kind are anything but. The Brazilian summer regularly brings torrential rains, with catastrophic flooding and mudslides becoming more and more frequent occurrences.

Just last April saw a disastrous mudslide triggered by

© World Socialist Web Site

heavy rain in Niteroi, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, where over 200 died and 11,000 were left homeless. The greatest share of the dead was concentrated in the Morro do Bumba favela, which had been built on a slope containing a defunct garbage dump.

Sections of the Brazilian media, international observers and even some politicians are forced to acknowledge the obvious: the present calamity was entirely foreseeable and largely preventable. Moreover, its principal cause lies not with extreme weather, but rather with the extreme poverty and social inequality produced by capitalism in Brazil.

In an editorial entitled “The Greatest Tragedy,” the Sao Paulo daily *Folha* denounced politicians for attributing the disaster to “natural causes,” “technical incompetence” or “a lack of resources.”

Last year, the paper pointed out, “not even half of the budget intended for the prevention of disasters was used.” The real cause of the tragedy, the editorial concluded, lay with the “failure of the authorities, which can only be described as criminal when the victims are numbered in the hundreds.”

Among the most stinging assessments of the catastrophe was that offered by Debarati Guha-Sapir, the director of the World Health Organization's Collaborating Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters.

“Brazil is not Bangladesh and there is no excuse, in the 21st century, for letting people die in landslides caused by rain,” she said.

Speaking to the Brazilian daily *Estado de Sao Paulo*, Debarati said that the only reason that people died was “political neglect.”

“Rains are natural phenomena,” she said. “But these people died because they have no political weight whatsoever, and there is no political will to resolve their dramas, which are repeated year after year.”

The UN official stressed that the costs of preparing for such disasters was not great and that it was inexcusable that this was not done and that officials continuously feigned surprise at heavy rains. “Moreover,” she said, “Brazil is a country that has money, at least for what it wants.”

Justice Minister Jose Eduardo Cardozo said that while occupation of land is carried out irresponsibly in Brazil, the principal cause was the “failure” of the government's housing policy over many years.

“What drives the poorest people to dangerous areas is precisely a longstanding housing policy in Brazil. In addition to the question of rainfall, we have as well a social question as the key question in this process.”

People live in high-risk areas because they have nowhere else to go, he said. “There, the Brazilian state, throughout its history, effectively failed, and today people are paying with their lives for this combination of problems.”

The federal Workers Party government, now headed by the newly inaugurated president, Dilma Rousseff, has sharply cut funding for disaster prevention, budgeting less than $82 million this year, an 18 percent cutback compared to last year. The non-governmental group Contas Abertas reported that the government in Brasilia spent just 40 percent of what it had budgeted for disaster prevention in 2010. The state of Rio de Janeiro, the site of the present disaster, received just 0.6 percent of the funding.

Rousseff visited the disaster-struck region Thursday and announced that $460 million would be appropriated for reconstruction. Like many others, she seemed to place the principal blame on the working poor who had built their precarious dwellings on the hillsides, which she described as “savage urbanization.”

“The illegal housing occupation in these zones has not been the exception, but the rule,” she said.

The reality is that Brazilian workers are forced into these areas because they cannot afford to live elsewhere. Real estate speculation has driven housing prices beyond the reach of the vast majority, and the government has failed to provide any public housing alternative.

Its minimal social assistance programs notwithstanding, more than eight years of rule by Brazil's Workers Party has left intact a capitalist system that concentrates wealth in the hands of a narrow financial elite while leaving millions without adequate incomes and housing and therefore exposed to deadly “natural” disasters.

Shortly after her inauguration at the beginning of this month, Rousseff sought the backing of Wall Street and the Brazilian financial oligarchy by announcing plans for $15 billion in budget cuts along with stepped-up privatizations.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site