

Mississippi River flood looms over Memphis

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Towns situated in the Mississippi River watershed are being inundated by the worst flooding since 1927.

On Monday, the river crested at 48 feet at the city of Memphis, Tennessee, 14 feet above flood stage. The flood is the first time since 1937 that the Mississippi has risen to more than 41 feet in Memphis.

In downtown Memphis, where the river is normally half a mile across, it measured more than three miles wide.

Thousands of residents have been told to evacuate their homes in the low-lying neighborhoods of Memphis, in particular those near the tributary waterways. Residents in these areas are overwhelmingly poor working class families. The Wolf and Loosahatchie Rivers and the Nonconnah Creek, which normally empty into the Mississippi, are blocked by the high water and are overflowing their banks into the town. The downtown Memphis community of Mud Island, population 5,000, was flooded May 5.

A resident told the *World Socialist Web Site* that over the past 20 years, developers have built up homes and rental units in the floodplain. Some areas have been subject to repeated flooding in the past few years. The tourism industry in Memphis has driven up the cost of living, making affordable housing scarce for the large low-wage retail and hospitality workforce. As a result, poorer residents may have few housing options outside of the more flood-prone areas.

As the Mississippi rose to 48 feet, Memphis authorities asserted that the city was prepared. “We don’t have much time, but fortunately we’re ready for it,” Mayor AC Wharton told CBS News. Last week, local emergency crews went door to door to urge residents to evacuate.

Wharton said officials issued evacuation notices to 1,300 households, and issued non-mandatory “alerts” to some 250 others on Sunday. In all, 3,075 buildings, including 949 homes and 12 apartment complexes, are threatened with flooding in Shelby County.

Close to 400 residents are staying at three local shelters, including 200 crowded into one gymnasium at a church east of the city. Shelby County officials are relying entirely upon religious-based organizations to house the displaced. In flooding last year, a resident noted, federal agencies reserved a public community center to house residents but took a very long time to reimburse the city.

The flooding presents a health hazard to residents throughout the region. The water is contaminated with farm chemicals such as fertilizer nitrates and pesticides, debris and other impurities. Such pollution poses risks to human health as well as the marine life in the Gulf of Mexico. Memphis residents commented that the river

smelled acrid and oily.

In addition, because the city’s sewage system lacks the capacity to pump all of the waste that has filled the system into its treatment plant, “It basically is discharging straight into the Mississippi,” Public Works Deputy Director Robert Knecht told the *Memphis Daily News*. “They basically just cannot treat all of that sewage at one time.... That will be the practice until we can once again get it back to the point where it can be treated through our processes.”

It could be as long as two weeks before the river recedes enough to relieve pressure on tributaries in the Memphis-Shelby County area, US Army Corps of Engineers officials estimated Monday. “We’re going to have to let these waters go down tremendously to get back to something close to normal,” Shelby County Office of Preparedness Director Bob Nations told the *Commercial Appeal* newspaper. During a Monday press conference, Nations said that property damage would not be assessed for some time. “It’s going to be a nasty one, it’s going to be an expensive one,” he commented.

The Mississippi River is the third-largest watershed in the world, draining more than 40 percent of the United States. Meteorologists had been warning of the spring floods since the blizzards dropped massive amounts of snow on the upper Midwest, coupled with extremely heavy rains in the South. Over a two-week stretch in April, the Mid-South region experienced 600 percent more rain than usual, according to the Army Corps’ Memphis District commander, Col. Vernie Reichling.

“It’s kind of a hydrological perfect storm,” National Weather Service spokesperson Chris Vaccaro commented to the *Guardian* Monday. “It’s too much precipitation in too short of a time and in the wrong places. It is the confluence of vast amounts of precipitation in terms of melting snowfall and rain, and then also the rain-swollen Ohio River flowing into the already swollen Mississippi.”

Climate scientists have long predicted increases in severe weather events such as the blizzards, tornado-laden storms, torrential rains and droughts. In congressional testimony Monday, Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment and Security President Peter Gleick noted that the Mississippi watershed had experienced a steep increase in flood events over the past two decades.

“All along the river, the Mississippi is reaching unprecedented flood levels,” Gleick said. “We are now moving into a situation where all weather and storm events are, to some degree, influenced by human-induced climate change. The links between climate change and extreme events cannot be ignored.”

In spite of such warnings, however, the federal and state

governments have done next to nothing in terms of upgrading the country's physical infrastructure, or improving the safety of housing in the lower-lying areas. Moreover, no preparations were put in place to evacuate towns ahead of time or provide an organized recovery.

As in the aftermath of every other disaster that has befallen the South in recent years—including Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, last year's Gulf oil disaster and "thousand year" Mid-South rainfall, and April's catastrophic spate of tornadoes—the working class of the region is left to fend for itself.

Southern states are particularly afflicted with poverty and threadbare physical and social infrastructure, and as with budgets throughout the country, austerity measures were on the order of the day before the disasters hit. The impact of the April storms and the Mississippi floods may deal a shattering blow to state funds and tax revenues over the next several years, resulting in the collapse of funding for education, health care, and other basic provisions.

The 1927 floods, which took up to 1,000 lives and rendered 600,000 homeless, prompted the construction of the federal levee system along the Mississippi beginning in 1928. This allowed for a far greater management of spring snow melt flowing southward into the Gulf of Mexico and mitigated flooding in low-lying areas. These floodplains, where land was cheap and the river provided a strategic means of transport, became a concentrated area of both residential and commercial development in the ensuing decades.

After nearly a century, the patchwork of locks and levees, long under-maintained, is in a state of disrepair. The failure of the flood management system even in one site may endanger the lives of thousands and destroy vast swaths of agricultural development.

Flooding in the region has backed up barge shipments on the Ohio River. At Carutherville, Missouri, the US Coast Guard halted river traffic Friday over concerns that wakes from barges would send water over the top of the town's floodwall.

Key highways have been impacted as well, including the major shipping route Interstate 40. A 23-mile section of the road has been closed between Little Rock, Arkansas, and Memphis, and rerouted with detours of hundreds of miles. Trucking companies have warned that if the flooding persists, the disruption of transport will soon be felt in the broader economy.

Memphis is at the center of the United States' shipping industry, with the busiest cargo airport in the world and a major freight rail crossing connecting the North-South lines of Chicago and New Orleans with the East-West lines.

Highway 51, the main artery connecting Memphis to northern Shelby County, has also been closed. Railways have also been forced to take lengthy detours around flooding in Missouri.

The Army Corps has opened spillways in an attempt to relieve the pressure in the Mississippi tributaries. Last week, the agency blasted away the Birds Point levee in order to prevent catastrophic flooding in the small Illinois town of Cairo, situated at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers.

As the flood moves downstream, other cities, including Vicksburg, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana, face inundation. The river is expected to crest in Vicksburg on May 20, at a height of 57.5 feet, 10 feet above its current level. Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour declared that the state confronted a

"monumental" disaster, with thousands in need of evacuation and recovery aid. However, Barbour recommended that ordinary people look to their neighbors for help rather than a government-coordinated rescue.

Authorities in Louisiana have frantically undertaken a much-needed dredging of the river at New Orleans to prevent any backups as the water moves more swiftly down to sea level. The city itself sits below sea level, making it extremely vulnerable to a potential levee breach.

The flood threatens to impact the Gulf of Mexico oil industry. Bloomberg News cited consulting firm Lipow Oil Associates LLC, which estimated Monday that southern Louisiana oil operations could be closed down, impacting 11 refineries that produce 13 percent of US output. "The worst case is that the Mississippi rises and we get actual flooding in the refineries and that could shut them down several months like we saw with Hurricane Katrina," the firm's president, Andy Lipow, commented during an appearance on Bloomberg's "Inside Track."

At 8 a.m. Monday, officials gave the orders to slowly open gates at the Bonnet Carre spillway just north of New Orleans in order to divert some of the river flow into Lake Pontchartrain. The spillway must be opened gradually, Bonnet Carre operations manager Victor Landry told Reuters. "We are not going to open it up full bore immediately," he said, predicting that half of the spillway's 350 bays may be open by later in the week. "We haven't seen these sort of river stages or flows, from what I am hearing, since the Great Flood of '27."

The Army Corps plans to open two other floodways in the coming days, marking the first time on record the three outlets have been opened at once. Officials have requested permission from the state to open the Morganza Spillway north of Baton Rouge, a move that would inundate much of Louisiana's most abundant farmland. Residents across seven parishes have been warned that if the floodgates are opened, they will likely be hit with flood depths ranging from 5 to 25 feet.



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