

Beijing floods kill at least 37

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The heaviest rainfall in six decades hit Beijing over the weekend, resulting in the deaths of at least 37 people, mostly by drowning or in building collapses. Areas of the Chinese capital were in chaos because of the torrential rain.

Parts of Beijing were reported to be submerged under a metre-high “sea” of water, affecting 1.9 million people, especially in Fangshan district (800,000 people), which received 460 millimetres of rain in 14 hours on Saturday. Numerous roads, bridges and hydraulic facilities were damaged, destroying hundreds of cars, with some drivers unable to escape.

The economic losses are reported to be close to 10 billion yuan (\$US1.5 billion). At the height of the downpour, more than 500 flights were cancelled, stranding 80,000 passengers. Train services between Beijing and Guangzhou were suspended because the line was submerged at Nangangwa in Fengtai District.

Thousands of police officers were deployed to direct traffic to higher ground, while civil service workers had to remove hundreds of manhole covers to accelerate drainage from the roads. Each hole was guarded by a worker to ensure that nobody would fall in. Many had to stay at their posts in the heavy rain for over 10 hours.

Millions of Internet users criticised authorities, complaining that despite heavy traffic, the user-pay highways continued to stop cars for toll fees. None of the massive facilities built for the 2008 Olympics Games were opened to provide temporary shelter for evacuated residents.

Above all, the authorities are facing criticism over the inadequate drainage system for the city of some 20 million people. In order to placate popular anger,

Beijing municipal government’s official microblogging site promised to build more water control systems in the future.

Despite feverish development over the past decade, driven by short-term property speculation and the building of showcase projects, from the National Grand Theatre and modern highways to high-end shopping districts for the ultra-wealthy, Beijing’s drainage system was only able to absorb one fifth of the rain over the weekend.

The aging system, built in the 1950s, was designed to handle the highest rainfall expected over a 1-3 year period (36-45 millimetres)—compared to 10-15 years in New York, or 5-10 years in Tokyo. Only the drainage sections around Tiananmen Square—the physical centre of China’s political power—and the 2008 Olympics site could cope with rainfall of 70 millimetres.

Both the national and municipal authorities in Beijing, like those in every major Chinese city, have refused to make essential infrastructure the priority for urban planning. No mayor or Communist Party secretary can expect to be promoted making such investments, especially “underground” projects that are little noticed by visiting foreign investors or their superiors in the official bureaucracy. They prefer instead grand “image” projects to showcase rapid economic expansion under their leadership, such as the Beijing International Airport—now the second largest in the world after the Atlanta International Airport in the US.

There is no lack of available technology. Qingdao’s drainage system, on the Shandong Peninsula, is capable of handling at least 100 millimetres of rain. It was built by German colonial settlers over a century ago. Even

Beijing's ancient buildings, such as the Forbidden City and Tuancheng Fortress, built during the Ming Dynasty 600 years ago, escaped flooding, despite being at the epicentre of last weekend's rains, because of their well-planned underground drainage systems.

An article in Shanghai's *Dongfang Daily* on Sunday exposed the authorities' lack of interest in improving Beijing's poorly built drainage system. Beijing Water Authority engineer Ma Fengbin had written in the *Beijing Water* magazine in May 2009 that the drainage standards were insufficient, the equipment was aging, and the construction of drainage facilities had fallen behind. Further, there was a glaring problem of stagnant water caused by urban construction, and inadequate administration for ensuring the safe operation of infrastructure.

In June 2011, after torrential rains caused massive traffic disruption, the Beijing Drainage Group (BDG) had explained that the drainage system's poor standards were the main reason for the flooding.

However, according to the Shanghai-based *First Financial Daily*, the state-owned BDG, which managed the capital's drainage system, had focussed on investing in sewage treatment in recent years because of the higher gross profit margins involved—21.56 percent in 2010—compared to just 4.28 percent for drainage operations.

According to *Dongfang Daily*, Beijing Industrial University engineering professor Zhou Yuwen warned last year that China's urban drainage system "lacks long-term planning". He said the universities produced relatively few talented graduates in the field and there was a lack of up-to-date textbooks. Zhou said computer technology could simulate the flooding levels in any particular location and calculate how much water needed to be diverted. With rapid urbanisation, he warned, as concrete increasingly covered the surface of the cities, the drainage system was facing ever more pressure, with the underground infrastructure lagging far behind above-ground construction.

The Chinese authorities are extremely efficient in colluding with real estate developers. They speedily

approve profitable projects, and use police and thugs to break up resistance by residents who refuse to make way. Beijing is at the heart of China's property bubble. In 2010, the city's combined land values were estimated to be greater than the gross domestic product of the United States, the world's largest economy.

Any move to renovate the drainage system in the capital, as the Beijing Water Authority admitted, would face numerous obstacles, because many new buildings have been constructed over the old underground networks. To tear down the buildings is hardly an option. Moreover, there remains no coordination between urban construction projects waiting approval and any upgrading of the drainage system.



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