

Bangladesh and Assam devastated by floods

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16 July 2012

Major floods and landslides in Bangladesh and the northern Indian state of Assam last month have led to hundreds of deaths, inundated thousands of villages and left millions homeless. While torrential monsoonal rains produced the floods, their devastating impact is the result of decades of official indifference and negligence.

The floods in Assam are the worst since 2004, with 21 of the state's 27 districts affected. According to officials, about 1 million people have had to evacuate their homes after flood waters from the swollen Brahmaputra River swamped 2,084 villages across the state. More than 300,000 people were crammed into 405 relief camps hurriedly set up in 12 districts. Evacuation and rescue efforts were haphazard, with the Indian government mobilising the army and air force.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh toured the region by helicopter, telling the media that "the people of Assam are facing one of the worst floods in recent times." But he announced just 50 billion rupees (\$US900 million) in flood relief, a fraction of what is needed. The right-wing Asoma Gana Parishad (Assam Peoples Association) called for 300 billion rupees to be allocated for relief, but in office this party did nothing to improve flood prevention infrastructure.

Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi did not bother to cancel his visit to United States. One of his ministers, Nilomoni Sen Dea, admitted that the government did not foresee the disaster and took no action to prevent it. "We never thought the situation would turn this grim when the monsoon-fed rivers swelled a week ago," he said.

The Assam Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has demanded a probe into the Assam water resources

department, which is responsible for flood prevention measures, such as the construction and maintenance of river embankments. The AHRC raised concerns over the reported "looting of several billions of rupees" by unscrupulous department officials.

Other critics pointed out that the rainfall did not exceed the norm for the monsoon season, and accused state authorities of mismanaging several large dams. Dam managers, possibly seeking to maximise hydro-electric potential, allowed catchment areas to fill, leaving little room for monsoonal rains.

When rising waters threatened the dams, the authorities were forced to release large amounts of water without warning. The sudden discharges caused rivers downstream to overflow their banks, inundating large areas. Ironically, state authorities had justified the building of these dams and the displacement of peasants and tribal groups by touting better flood control as a major benefit.

In Bangladesh, which is downstream from Assam, at least 100 people are dead and 200,000 people have been trapped by floodwaters. Access to clean water and food has become a major problem. Three districts in the south west of Bangladesh—Chittagong, Cox's Bazaar and Bandarban—are the worst affected. At least 37 have died in Cox's Bazaar, 33 in Bandarban and 21 in Chittagong.

Many deaths have been due to landslides. The toll is expected to rise as rescuers pull bodies from the mud and debris. Some areas lost contact with the outside world and people were forced to cope without assistance. Agriculture has been badly affected, with large areas of crops destroyed and livestock killed.

Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to flooding and experienced severe floods in 2004, 2009 and 2011. Cities like Dhaka and Chittagong, as well as Kolkata in the neighbouring Indian state of West Bengal, are listed as high flood-risk areas with large populations. The Bangladesh government, which this year is spending 12.9 billion taka (\$US158 million), or 6.8 percent of its total expenditure, on the military, has done little to improve flood prevention.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina cynically dismissed the devastation caused by the flooding, declaring: “We think we need floods to have groundwater aquifers recharged and have silts on croplands.” She urged journalists to be “careful” in reporting the floods so as not to “trigger panic among people.”

More than six decades after formal independence from British rule, governments throughout the Indian subcontinent have proven incapable of ameliorating the impact of the monsoonal flooding that ravages the region each year. The arbitrary partition of the subcontinent along communal lines in 1947 has only compounded the obstacles to the rational planning of water resources to prevent flooding, provide power and store water to lessen the impact of droughts.

Recurrent flooding is just one issue that exposes the organic inability of the region’s ruling classes to meet any of the basic needs of working people. The only solution lies in the united struggle of workers and rural masses throughout the region to fight for workers’ and peasants’ governments and the establishment of a united socialist states of South Asia to take the flood prevention measures needed to avoid such disasters.



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