

Floods in South Asia kill hundreds

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18 September 2014

Heavy rains in the northern parts of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have triggered flash floods and landslides over the past three weeks, killing more than 500 people, and leaving hundreds of thousands of people homeless. Affected families are now threatened with water-borne diseases because of the absence of basic medical facilities in cut off areas.

The downpours started at the beginning of September in Pakistan and India, and a week earlier in Bangladesh. Many people are now living without roofs over their heads, with no official relief, and have lost their livelihoods from farming or cattle. According to government estimates, some 400,000 people remain stranded in India and Pakistan. Across the three countries, about two million people are affected.

In the worst-hit country, Pakistan, about 318 people have died, over 1,000 villages have been badly affected and more than 325,000 acres of crops have been damaged. Punjab, the country's most populous province, and Pakistani-administered Kashmir are primarily affected. Floodwaters flowing further south are threatening to inundate the homes of a further 700,000 people in the next few days.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government claims to have deployed 12 military helicopters and more than 250 boats for rescue and relief operations. However, Defence Minister Khwaja Muhammad Asif admitted that there had been a "slow reaction" in the relief operations.

This was despite the fact that, according to Muhammad Riaz, the chief meteorologist at the Flood Forecasting Division, the Met Office sent "advisories" and "alerts" to the various departments concerned. "After being hit by 21 major floods since 1950, one would have thought Pakistan would by now have an effective flood management and disaster relief plan in hand," the *Dawn* newspaper commented.

In India, the worst affected area is the state of Jammu

and Kashmir where 225 people have died. According to the Inspector General of Police in the Jammu region, "more than 150 bodies have (also) been recovered" but "the exact number is hard to assess as we are still searching for bodies."

Across Indian Kashmir, at least 700 villages were submerged, and more than 2,000 villages were affected. At least 60 percent of Srinagar, the state capital, was flooded, stranding 400,000 people out of a total population of 900,000.

To deflect the anger of victims, Indian authorities have engaged in face-saving activities. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government claimed to have deployed 61 aircraft, helicopters and more than 260 boats for relief and rescue operations. Modi declared the floods a "national level disaster" and announced 10 billion rupees (\$US164 million) as "special assistance for immediate relief and rehabilitation."

Popular anger has emerged over the authorities' failure to issue warnings and the inadequacy of the relief operations. According to NDTV news on September 10, "anger boiled over today among the residents of Srinagar after being stranded for days in the flooded city... Army vehicles were pelted with stones as they tried to make their way through the city." *Rediff* reported: "On Wednesday [September 10], four helicopters, carrying relief material, could not land after angry locals threatened to throw stones at them."

A flood victim, Abdul Aziz of Jawahar Nagar in Srinagar, said he had to abandon his home and drive his family to safety in the early morning. "I could not save anything as the government did not issue any flood warning," he said. "The majority of my neighbours who were sleeping are still trapped in their homes."

A doctor at a hospital in Srinagar told the media: "There is no electricity. The hospital is entirely working on two gensets (portable generators), on an alternate basis. Nothing is coming from anywhere ... we

had to hijack water, there is no water here... We cut bed sheets in two and sterilised them for use in surgery.”

In Bangladesh, over 492 villages have been affected, with about 35,000 houses damaged. The death toll is at least 57. Though flood waters have begun to recede, there is a growing threat of waterborne diseases. According to Mahfuzur Rahman, an information technology officer at the National Crisis Management Centre, “a total of 6,527 people fell ill in the flood-hit areas” and out “of them, 3,642 had diarrhoea, 1,140 developed skin disease and 446 had eye problems.”

A Water Development Board executive engineer cited by the *Dhaka Times* pointed to the decrepit state of flood protection infrastructure and said “a 17-kilometre area of the flood protection embankment at different points has become vulnerable due to the flood.” Repairs costing 4.6 billion taka (\$US60 million), he said, had not been done due to lack of funds.

In Kashmir, the Indian and Pakistan governments have both made phony offers of help to flood victims on the other side of the Line of Control (LoC) that divides the region between the two countries. These are nothing but crude attempts to whip up chauvinism, score points against each other and cover up their own failures in providing flood relief.

Indian Prime Minister Modi, who heads the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), wrote to his Pakistani counterpart Sharif, saying: “It is a matter of great distress that the retreating monsoon rains have played havoc in many parts of our two countries... In this hour of distress, the government of India is ready to provide humanitarian assistance to those areas if the Pakistan government needs it.”

Responding, a Pakistan government source boasted that “our rescue and relief operations are proceeding effectively” said that the people of Pakistan were “ready to help” victims in Indian Kashmir “in whatever way possible to mitigate their sufferings caused by the heavy floods.”

Floods occur annually in South Asia, affecting India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and frequently take hundreds, if not thousands, of lives. Successive governments in the three countries have failed to take the necessary measures to prevent such devastation or provide adequate relief for victims. This is an indictment of capitalist rule across South Asia.

These countries spend billions of dollars on military budgets, but not on flood prevention and proper rescue and relief measures. The vast majority of victims are workers and rural poor who are invariably the most exposed to flooding and the least able to cope with its consequences.

Flooding is a problem that spans the sub-continent. Most of the rivers causing the floods have their source in the Himalayas and flow through India to Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, rivalry between the various states, rooted in the 1947 communal partition of British India, has prevented any coordinated effort to control the floods in the region.



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