

Indian heatwave kills more than 2,200

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The deadliest heatwave in India since 1998 has killed over 2,200 people throughout the country. Most of the dead—2,177—are from the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana (a state recently carved out from Andhra Pradesh). The majority of the victims are construction workers, homeless people, street dwellers and the poor.

The deaths have been caused by heatstroke or sunstroke—exposure to the extreme heat—which causes unbearable symptoms such as headache, dehydration, fainting and extremely high heartbeat. The heatwave is estimated to be the fifth deadliest recorded in the world and second deadliest in India. In the 1998 heatwave, 2,541 people died across India.

In some areas like Hyderabad, the temperature is reported to have reached as high as 45 degrees Celsius or 113 degrees Fahrenheit on Thursday. The highest temperature in the country's history, 47 degrees Celsius or 118 degrees Fahrenheit, was recorded at Angul in Odisha State on May 25. B. P. Yadav, the director of India's Meteorological Department stated.

Deaths were reported in other Indian states—22 in Uttar Pradesh and 21 in Orissa—while people across India suffered from the effects of the heat. The extreme weather also made its impact on the northern states of Rajasthan and Haryana, as well as the capital Delhi, where roads melted due to the heat.

The high number of deaths demonstrates not only the destruction wrought by the extreme weather, but also the contempt of the Indian ruling class for the working people, the poor and the oppressed masses. The fate of the victims reveals how capitalist rule in India has subjected working people and poor to miserable living and working conditions. Construction workers are forced to work outdoors under deadly hot conditions, just for a living. Homeless people face similar conditions.

In Gurgaon, a special economic zone near New Delhi,

one young construction worker, Sunder, told the media: “How do we cope with the heat? We have to raise kids and so we have to work even though it's hot. Otherwise what will our children eat?”

The hot and dry weather conditions have been made worse by winds blowing from Sindh Province in Pakistan. Meteorology Department officials predicted that the conditions would improve with the onset of annual monsoon rains in late May, but that prospect has now been postponed to early June.

Though this is a natural disaster, successive national and state governments, including the current national Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have not prepared people for such conditions, nor taken action to minimise the casualties and suffering. India is a country of 1.2 billion people, of whom one third have no access to electricity.

Both the federal and state governments have responded with grossly inadequate measures, while “advising” people in affected areas to take precautions. CNN news quoted P. Tulsi Rani, special commissioner for disaster management in Andhra Pradesh, saying: “The state government has taken up education programs through television and other media to tell people not to venture into the outside without a cap, to drink water and other measures.”

Heatwaves occur annually in India. Environmental scientists have predicted that, because of global warming, heatwaves will hit more frequently. In June 2014, at least 1,344 people died in Ahmedabad due to a heatwave. In 2003, a heatwave claimed more than 1,200 lives. In 2002, at least 734 were killed, 666 of whom were from Andhra Pradesh. On every occasion, governments expressed perfunctory concern but the death toll was forgotten as soon as the heatwave faded away.

R. S. Deshpande, a fellow at the Indian Council of Research, told the *Times of India* network: “Predicting

weather events may be hard, but we can prepare for them. We don't think about raising protective structures—canvas shelters for labourers and their families, buildings that can be opened up during the summer or monsoon, or changing working hours. Delhi has rain baseras (shelters) but no summer baseras.”

The poor cannot afford protective measures, like air-conditioning, homes with proper roofs and decent clothing. Even those who find shelter in buildings with electricity face the risk of outages. In the capital Delhi, higher usage of air-conditioning caused blackouts. In July 2012, power cuts left 700 million people without electricity.

Rising global warming is predicted to worsen the situation. For every 1 degree Celsius increase in temperature, there would be an estimated 2.1 percent increase in heat-related deaths. Climate change researchers also warn that the heatwaves will be of longer duration in the future.

Writing in the *Hindu* on January 30, N. Gopal Raj reported that a group of Indian and US scientists found that heatwaves would “sharply rise in urban areas” across the globe. Examining data from 217 urban areas on earth, the group found that prolonged periods of high temperature had increased between 1973 and 2012.

Another group of scientists from the UK has predicted that the number of heat-related deaths worldwide will rise by 66 percent during the 2020s, 257 percent by 2050 and 535 percent by the 2080s.

Reducing the number of victims in such disasters requires massive reallocations of funds for infrastructure and scientific warning systems. But the Modi government and Indian ruling elite have made clear their indifference toward the wellbeing of the working and poor masses.



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