

Flooding across South Asia affects millions of people

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Flooding throughout South Asia following monsoonal rains, exacerbated by Tropical Cyclone Komen, has resulted in hundreds of deaths. An escalating humanitarian crisis confronts millions of people, many of them among the most impoverished in the region. Parts of Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan have been affected, while flooding has also hit areas of Vietnam.

Downpours, which began last week, have been particularly devastating in Burma. At least 12 of the country's 14 provinces are affected, and an estimated 200,000 people are in need of aid. On Saturday, the government declared a state of emergency. By Monday, the official death toll reached 46, and is expected to grow as contact is made with areas cut off by floodwaters.

Large swathes of Myanmar were hit by torrential rain, gale-force winds, flash flooding and landslides, leaving many with little chance of escape. Survivors spoke of their terror, as their homes were engulfed by floodwaters.

Aye Myat Su, who sheltered in a monastery at Kalay, a town in the Sagaing region, told the AFP: "There was no warning ... we thought it was the normal flooding. But within a few hours the whole house was under water. My husband had to get on to the roof as there was no way out."

Electricity is out in many areas, while roads, bridges and other means of transport have been cut. Farmers face returning to ruined crops and severely damaged land. Most of those affected have received no aid or assistance. There are fears that floodwaters moving from the north will create a further catastrophe in the country's low-lying delta region.

Among the hardest hit states is Rakhine, where around 140,000 members of the Rohingya ethnic

minority live in makeshift camps, having been displaced from their homes by state-sanctioned persecution.

The *Burma Times* reported that the police and military forced Rohingyas in Rakhine's Kyauktaw township out of the abandoned schools and community centres in which they sought shelter on Friday. According to the article, the Rohingyas were told that the shelters were only for "those who belong to this country" and had to flee to dangerous mountainous areas to avoid floodwaters. The Burmese establishment treats the persecuted Rohingya minority as "illegal immigrants" and grants them no rights.

The impact of the flooding has been exacerbated by Burma's grinding poverty. In a measure of the indifference of the major imperialist powers, including the US, to the plight of Burma's Rohingya, a UNICEF appeal earlier this year for \$24.9 million to aid displaced children in Rakhine received a paltry \$5.6 million.

The flooding is thought to have been worsened by widespread deforestation. On Saturday, the *New York Times* quoted U Win Myo Thu, head of EcoDev, an environmental organisation in Myanmar. He said the floods were a product of "heavy rain, mismanagement of irrigation projects and dramatic deforestation" and pointed to dam projects over the past two decades that were developed "without proper management and research."

In 2008, Cyclone Nargis resulted in mass devastation and an estimated 138,000 fatalities. The disaster provoked widespread hostility to the Burmese military junta, which did little to plan for such a catastrophe. The Western powers, led by the US, did nothing to aid the Burmese people, but used the tragedy to place pressure on the regime to turn away from its relations

with China.

Now that the Burmese government has established close ties with the US, its attacks on the Rohingyas and democratic rights are tacitly accepted. Washington and its allies, while making only a token display of alleviating the current humanitarian crisis, have not criticised the government's paltry and disorganised relief efforts.

At the same time, Myanmar's government acknowledged that its response to the disaster was "weak." Fearing growing opposition, it threatened to prosecute anyone disseminating "false news relating to the natural disaster with the intention of frightening people."

In India, at least 178 people have died since Cyclone Komen struck last Thursday. Over four million people from more than 10,000 villages have been affected in the impoverished states of West Bengal, Manipur, and Orissa. According to officials, some 214,000 people were forced to flee their homes and take shelter in relief camps. On Tuesday, flooding on a bridge in Madhya Pradesh derailed two trains, killing at least 25 people, and wounding many more.

In Nepal, landslides following heavy rains killed 34 people. According to authorities, 90 people have died over the past two months in landslides, and flash floods as a result of monsoonal rains.

In Bangladesh, some 60,000 people were evacuated following the onset of Cyclone Komen, while as many as 300,000 were cut-off in the Cox's Bazar district alone. At least seven people are believed to have died, including five people in a landslide. Last month, monsoonal rains caused flash flooding which affected over half a million people, and left at least 23 dead, most of them from Cox's Bazar, a fishing port.

In Pakistan, flooding over the past days has killed at least 118 people, and affected 800,000 people in 2,275 villages. Almost 3,000 homes have been destroyed by the deluges, while tens of thousands of villagers have been left homeless.

According to Vietnamese authorities on Monday, flooding there resulted in 22 deaths. Thousands of people were displaced. In some areas, floodwaters merged with potentially toxic runoff from open pit coal mines and coal-fired power plants, which may contain the heavy metals arsenic, lead, manganese and other elements, posing threats to health and the environment.

While the monsoonal rains have been particularly heavy this year, the fact that annual downpours routinely create humanitarian disasters in South Asia is an indictment of the conditions forced upon millions of people by the global capitalist system. While governments spend large sums of money on facilities to attract foreign investors, virtually nothing is done to protect the population against the impact of the region's regular cyclones and flooding.



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