

India: Hundreds die in Tamil Nadu floods

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Massive flooding across the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu has taken the lives of 280 people since early November and effectively cut off Chennai, the state capital and the country's fourth largest city. Over 50 people have been killed in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh and two in Puducherry.

More than a million people have been affected by the heaviest rainfall in the state in over a century with the Indian Meteorological Department on Thursday predicting three more days of torrential rains. Damage is estimated so far at over \$US3 billion.

Currently more than 164,000 people are homeless and sheltering in 460 camps in Chennai, Cuddalore, Thiruvallur and Kanchipuram. Emergency assistance has yet to reach some parts of the state. In many areas, only the roofs of houses are visible and where the water has subsided there is thick black mud and garbage.

Much of Chennai and its suburbs remain submerged for the fourth consecutive day under up to two-and-a-half metres of water. Schools, hospitals, factories and other facilities in and around the flat coastal city have been shut down. This includes the Ford, Renault, Daimler, Hyundai and Nissan auto plants, the Royal Enfield motorcycle company, the Indian Oil Corporation and three commercial television networks.

Yesterday the media reported that at least 18 patients in intensive care at MIOT International, a Chennai private hospital, have died since December 2 after floods flooded the power generators that maintain critical life-support systems.

All highways to the city are closed with most mobile telephone networks in Chennai down. The city's central railway station was shut on Wednesday and on Thursday Chennai airport was closed. Over 1,500 stranded passengers had to be rescued from the international airport on Wednesday. The Airport Authority of India has announced that the facility may be able to start partial operations today.

The majority of those affected are working-class families and the poor. The cost of basic items—milk, vegetables and drinking water—has skyrocketed. A two-litre bottle of mineral water, normally available for 30 rupees, now costs 150 rupees while a one-litre packet of milk, usually 20 rupees, is being sold in some places for 100 rupees.

D.K. Sharma, medical superintendent at All India Institute of Medical Sciences, told the Indo-Asian News Service on Friday: "The situation will become critical now and there are possibilities that diseases like cholera, diarrhea would spread and various types of infections would increase. The intake of safe and clean water at this time is very important to avoid any disease." He also warned that stagnant water contaminated by bacteria could result in several types of severe skin and throat infections.

In some areas Chennai authorities gave no warning to local residents before opening flood gates on some of the city's 30 waterways. One South Chennai resident told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that he was not given adequate information about water being released from a nearby lake. The Tamil Nadu public works department claimed that it had issued warnings but there had been a breakdown in media and phone communications. In North Chennai, residents held protests denouncing the state government for its lack of any rescue response in their locality.

An Indian home ministry official said that the central government would be sending "technical experts and engineers who will find a solution to flush out all the flood water. It has to be drained out soon, but we don't know how."

Addressing the Indian parliament on Thursday, Home Minister Rajnath Singh described the situation in Tamil Nadu as "alarming" and said that Chennai had been "turned into an island."

On Thursday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi

announced the release of 10 billion rupees (\$US154 million) for flood relief in Tamil Nadu. Indian government officials claimed that this was on top of 9.4 billion rupees (\$145 million) previously announced. These amounts are a pittance compared to the magnitude of the devastation, not just in Chennai but across the state. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa Jayaram has called on the Indian government to provide 80 billion rupees in flood relief assistance.

Contrary to government claims that authorities are providing “all possible help” for flood victims, the official relief operations are very limited. While over 4,000 military personnel have been deployed, on Thursday only four helicopters were involved in dropping food, water and medicines. In Chengalpattu, near Chennai, residents have told the media that they have not received any government relief and that food parcels are only being distributed by NGOs and local organisations.

Indian authorities have attempted to blame climate change for the flooding but according to weather experts, the seasonal north-east monsoon, worsened by the El Nino effect in the eastern Pacific Ocean, was mainly responsible for the unprecedented rainfall.

The flooding is an indictment of all levels of government—central, state and city—that have been promoting Chennai as a “developed” metropolis in order to attract investors and allowed uncontrolled and unsafe development throughout the city.

In fact, one of the principal reasons for the devastation in Chennai is government endorsement of major building projects without proper planning and lack of serious flood-precaution measures. The construction of high-rise buildings on wetlands and marshes that previously absorbed heavy rain has led major to flooding even during normal monsoon periods. The absence of effective storm-water drainage systems means that the water has nowhere to go and quickly inundates low-lying areas and roads throughout the city.

Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) director Sunita Narain told the *Hindu* on December 3 said that the Chennai floods were the direct result of unregulated urbanisation. “Urban sprawls such as Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, Srinagar, have not paid adequate attention to the natural water bodies that exist in them.

In Chennai, each of its lakes has a natural flood discharge channel which drains the spillover. But we have built over many of these water bodies, blocking the smooth flow of water.”

According to CSE research, Chennai had over 600 lakes in the 1980s but by 2008 only a fraction were in healthy condition. State records also indicated that the total area of 19 major lakes, which provide storage, shrank from 1,130 hectares in the 1980s to around 645 hectares in the early 2000s. The CSE said that drains carrying surplus water from lakes to other wetlands area had also been reduced and hundreds of city storm-water drains required immediate de-silting.



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