

UK and Ireland devastated by floods

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The human cost of the severe flooding in large parts of northern England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland over the last week is emerging. The flooding resulted from Storm Desmond, which struck on December 4, bringing 30cm of rainfall in 24 hours.

Three people are known to have died, two drowning in the floodwaters. One of the fatalities, a 70-year-old man from County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, was found on a cross-border road in County Monaghan. According to reports, his car was stuck in flooding and he was swept away when he got out of the vehicle. Another man died when he fell into the River Kent in Cumbria.

An estimated £500 million of damage was caused by the flooding. More than 5,000 homes were affected by floodwater, with many people still without power.

The county of Cumbria in the north west of England was the worst hit, with the population in major urban centres, including Carlisle and Lancaster, deluged in water and thousands losing power to their homes. The waters rose to the first floor [i.e., second floor in US English] of some houses and 40 schools were closed across the county.

Roads and houses throughout the region, which includes remote areas of the Lake District National Park, were almost completely submerged and mobile homes swept away. Thousands of tonnes of debris fell onto roads, carriageways and bridges in landslides. Railway lines were submerged under up to eight feet of water.

In Cumbria, the historic Pooley Bridge, built in 1764, collapsed under the pressure of floodwater from the River Eamont. Many of the region's 1,500 bridges are under threat of collapse.

Heavy rain has continued all week, worsening the crisis and affecting rescue and cleanup operations. On Thursday evening, soldiers and fire brigades were sent into the Cumbrian town of Glenridding in the Lake District, which had already been deluged, with reports

of boulders weighing up to a tonne being washed into the area.

As with recent floods in the region and other parts of the UK, entire communities were initially left to fend for themselves. It was not until two days after the flooding began that the government even convened a meeting to discuss the crisis. By that stage, at least 60,000 homes were already without power, with many lacking clean water.

Following Prime Minister David Cameron convening the emergency Cobra committee Monday, the army was mobilised in Carlisle and other locations to help evacuate the many residents trapped by floodwaters. By Wednesday, 1,000 homes remained flooded.

The Royal Lancaster infirmary was forced to run on generator power after an electricity substation flooded. This cut the electricity to 55,000 homes and businesses in Lancaster, Morecambe, Carnforth and surrounding areas. The universities of Lancaster and Cumbria were forced to evacuate students after losing power, with Lancaster shutting down for the rest of the term.

Businesses, both small and large, were forced to close due to storm damage, putting hundreds of jobs at risk. Water treatment centres have also been out of action across the affected counties.

The response from the government has been predictable. Prime Minister David Cameron toured the flood-affected area, declaring that the defences were adequate but the storm had been too fierce. Chancellor George Osborne proposed a paltry £50 million flood damage relief, just 10 percent of the estimated damage costs. Virtually no relief is being granted towards the present crisis, with each family affected only able to claim *up to* £5,000 to protect their homes *in future*, by, for example raising electricity sockets to safer levels or installing barriers. As a result, many people are turning to charities for any relief from their grim situation.

The fact that only 15 percent of those affected by last

winter's floods received promised financial help points to a situation whereby those flooded this week face ongoing hardship, on top of the ever-present threat of more floods.

Storms such as Desmond have become more frequent over the last decade as global temperatures rise causing milder, wetter weather. Three such major storms have hit Britain since 2005. Some areas in Cumbria are now being submerged on an annual basis. This disproves that such occurrences are "once in 100 years" events, which is how successive governments in Britain continue to describe virtually every flooding crisis.

This "once in 100 years" myth has been used to justify brutal cuts in flood defence funding. In the years prior to 2010, there had been a relative increase in flood defence spending, as the result of a number of devastating floods over the previous decade, in which large parts of the UK, including areas of major urban centres such as Sheffield, England's fourth largest city and the historic university city of Oxford, were submerged. What were modest increases in flood defence funding came to an abrupt end after the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition came to power in 2010, as more than £100 billion in spending cuts was imposed.

Although rainfall hit record levels, the latest floods highlight how in the age of austerity, the ruling elite are seizing what is left from the public purse and spending it on the military and war.

Following the devastating floods in Somerset and parts of the Thames valley in 2013-14, the government proposed a meagre £2.3 billion to be spent on flood defences nationally over a six-year period.

In contrast, earlier that year, two "super" aircraft carriers were ordered to be built, each costing £3.1 billion. Over 2015-16, a tiny £370 million will be spent on flood defence, just 0.8 percent of the £45 billion that will be have been spent on the military's budget.

Decades of underfunding have resulted in totally inadequate flood defences. The defences built following floods in Cumbria in 2005 failed to keep the latest deluge out from people's homes.

There is no longer even a national budget available for flood defence in the UK. In 2011, a new funding system was introduced that meant local authorities and businesses were encouraged to "match" flood defence costs with national government. This led to defences

being prioritised by cost rather than effectiveness. Under this scheme, inadequate defensive walls were built in Cockermouth, west Cumbria, after severe flooding in 2009, with a substantial amount of funding raised from the local community. These proved ineffective against the floodwaters last weekend.

Tim Farron, the leader of the Liberal Democrat and an MP for some of the worst affected areas, who was trapped in his car during the flooding, commented this week, "It is heartbreaking to see the impact of flooding once more on local people....Lower priority schemes were shelved and should have been funded."

However, in the 2010-15 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, Farron supported the cuts to flood defences nationally. In 2013, Farron praised the dropping of the Vital Uplands project of Natural England, the government's adviser for the natural environment in England. Vital Uplands proposed growing more vegetation on hills in local areas in order to absorb more rainwater and reduce "the risk of downstream flooding".

Major flooding crises are now commonplace in the world's major capitalist countries. Well into the 21st century, the populations of major urban areas are offered essentially no protection from what are entirely predictable weather events. As global temperatures rise, so do the chances of major devastating storms.

In Britain, as across Europe and the United States, governments routinely claims there is no money for basic infrastructure requirements. Commenting on the Chancellor's Autumn Statement in which unprecedented public spending cuts were announced, the *Financial Times* noted that it revealed, "The nation's physical infrastructure—roads, railways, housing, schools and hospitals, flood defences and the rest—suffered swingeing cuts during the last parliament."

Yet billions in public money are being handed over to increase military spending. Last month, the Cameron government announced a further £12 billion in military spending.



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