

Widespread destruction in China following floods

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Catastrophic floods hit central and southern China along the Yangtze River after several days of heavy rain this past week. While figures vary, at least 186 people have been killed and dozens remain missing. Some 32 million people have been affected overall. The devastating impact of this and other so-called natural disasters can be traced back to corruption and the lack of adequate planning and preventative measures.

Rain began tapering off on Thursday leaving behind the floods that are the worst in nearly 20 years. However, more rain is expected as super typhoon Nepartak hits Fujian Province. In total, 26 provinces have been affected with 1.4 million people displaced. Hubei Province and its capital Wuhan, a city home to 10 million people, have been particularly hard-hit with a record 600mm of rain falling, according to the Chinese government.

President Xi Jinping ordered thousands of soldiers and police officers to take part in the relief efforts. According to China's state-owned CCTV, 2,700 troops were working in the most severely struck areas. Millions have lost access to transportation, power and clean water.

The most recent figures from the Chinese government also indicate a severe material and economic toll. There is an estimated \$7.6 billion in damages while 7.4 million acres of farmland has been flooded and 56,000 homes destroyed. These numbers are likely to rise, however, as China released them on July 3.

Premier Li Keqiang visited the worst struck areas on July 5 and 6 to make perfunctory statements of sympathy and pose for photo ops. As is the case after such devastating events, Li claimed safety would be a high priority going forward, while trying to project an air of leadership.

Speaking to the Huaihe River Water Conservancy

Commission, Li said, "The harder battle is yet to come. The Commission should always bear safety in mind and never slacken efforts. It should work in a well-coordinated way between the upper stream and lower stream, make good preparation for various kinds of emergencies and gain the initiative in flood control and disaster relief."

Heavy rains in the region also resulted in flooding in mid-June when 22 people were killed. Other regions of China have also been affected by the weather, including Xinjiang in the northwestern part of the country. A landslide in the Kunlun Mountains struck a village on Wednesday, killing at least 35 people.

Summer in the region is monsoon season with heavy rains and floods common. The large amount of precipitation this year has been attributed to a "super El Niño" effect, which is warming parts of the Pacific Ocean and impacting on global weather. A similar occurrence took place in 1998 when floods along the Yangtze killed 4,150 people. While the extreme weather could not have been prevented, it could have been predicted and planned for. In June, Vice Premier Wang Yang warned of the high probability of flooding in the Yangtze and Huai River basins.

The social impact of these floods is due to criminal negligence and corruption, which is rife throughout the Chinese government and businesses. While a small stratum at the top have enriched themselves, little attention is paid to flood prevention and the safety of workers and farmers whether in their neighborhoods or at their workplaces. Last year, according to *Forbes*, there were 335 billionaires in China, second only to 536 in the US.

In Wuhan, once called "the city of 100 lakes," many have been filled due to urbanization. Since the 1980s, the number in the city center fell from 127 to 30. With

the lakes filled, it becomes harder for water to drain properly, increasing the likelihood of flooding. Wang Caihua, a resident of the city and owner of a small cement plant, told the *South China Morning Post*, “Construction waste was dumped into the ponds and they became land. But they’ve now gone back to being underwater.”

Allocated money is often either lost or used improperly. In 2013, Wuhan began work on improving the city’s drainage system, which was scheduled to be completed this year. While allocating 13 billion yuan (\$US1.9 billion) for the project, the government has spent only 4 billion yuan and the completion date is now set for 2018. Scheduled upgrades to dikes to hold back floodwaters have not been completed. According to *Quartz*, some of those working on the projects have been arrested for corruption, including a local official in 2014 surnamed Tang who was leading the project.

When he came to power in 2012, President Xi Jinping initiated a broad anti-corruption campaign from the provincial levels up to the highest echelons of government. This gave Xi the appearance of trying to clean up Chinese politics in the eyes of the population, fed up with the corrupt practices of the bureaucracy as well as declining economic conditions.

In reality, the campaign was to consolidated Xi’s rule by targeting political opponents. Officials have been removed under the pretext of corruption, but their assigned duties, such as upgrading dikes, go unfinished.

The lack of adequate flood prevention measures is not restricted to China. Capitalist governments around the world ignore safety or improvements to infrastructure. One has only to look at the recent floods in the US state of West Virginia for another example of the terrible impact of official indifference for the lives of the poor and working class.



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