

Anger mounts over government handling of floods in China

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Nearly three weeks after the onset of intense flooding in northern China left hundreds of people dead and missing, anger has erupted among survivors. According to the *Asia Times*, media and internet users are accusing officials of negligence, with irate villagers declaring that they were not warned in advance of the impending deluge.

At least 273 people have died and 218 are missing amid catastrophic flooding along the Yangtze River. The state news agency Xinhua reported the flooding to be the worst in a decade. About 330,000 homes have been destroyed and economic damage is estimated at \$US8.5 billion.

During the first week of heavy rains, Hubei Province, along with its capital Wuhan, a city of 10 million people, was hard-hit with a record 600mm of rain.

On the weekend of July 9–10, typhoon Nepartak made landfall in Fujian province, after earlier lashing Taiwan. The typhoon forced more than 200,000 residents in 10 mainland cities to be relocated and 1,900 homes were destroyed. Power was cut for hundreds of thousands of households, while five airports were closed and hundreds of high-speed train journeys cancelled.

China's ministry of civil affairs said flooding and rain associated with the typhoon had impacted on over 31 million people in 12 provinces, submerged more than 2.7 million hectares of cropland and caused 67.1 billion yuan (\$US 13.4 billion) in damages. Meteorologists blamed the floods on a particularly intense El Nino weather pattern that has resulted in an increase of up to a 50 percent in rainfall in some areas.

Residents in flood-hit areas of Hebei Province, where more than 160 people were killed, have accused the authorities of negligence and inaction. After the floods destroyed the village of Daxian, residents told Al

Jazeera that officials had failed to warn them in time about the incoming storm.

Chinese-language posts on Twitter, which is blocked in China, included pictures and videos showing the devastation in Daxian. One video revealed water cascading over homes, turning streets into rivers and apparently sweeping several people away. Some images showed corpses in farm fields.

The Qi Lie River near Daxian had months earlier been blocked by a building contractor but no action was taken by officials. As the river swelled, residents said the local government chief had told them not to worry, because if it was serious senior officials would have contacted him. "It seems many people here had more idea about the imminent danger they faced than local officials did," an Al Jazeera correspondent reported.

As thousands of soldiers and police officers were dispatched, ostensibly to join the relief efforts, residents complained about their extensive losses and the indifference of the authorities. "I don't know who I can talk to. No one listens to me," Zhang Erqiang, father of two missing children, told Al Jazeera. Instead, Zhang was questioned by police demanding to know what he had told the media.

A flash flood near Xingtai, in Hebei Province, sparked outrage after local officials were accused of failing to warn citizens of the imminent deluge, and then trying to cover up the cause of the disaster. "Not to notify villagers about the Xingtai flood wasn't just an abandonment of the officials' duty—it was essentially manslaughter," one person wrote on China's Sina Weibo microblog.

Public anger intensified after pictures of drowned children being pulled from the muddy floodwaters circulated online. Residents raised suspicions that the sudden flood, which struck while villagers slept, was

the result of a deliberate release of water from a local reservoir, rather than the breaking of a levee in a nearby river, as officials claimed.

A local deputy Communist Party secretary absurdly suggested that there had been “no casualties” in the flood. The *Asia Times* reported a video of him kneeling before wailing relatives who lost family members quickly spread on social media. It showed three distraught women clutching his arm while asking how many had died. Other online footage revealed locals clashing with police trying to prevent them from taking complaints to central authorities.

Provincial leaders have announced that four local officials in Xingtai were suspended for being “ineffective in flood prevention and rescue and relief work.” Beijing’s standard response to every disaster is to prosecute low-level local officials in order to divert public criticism from the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership.

The devastating impact of the floods is due to criminal negligence and corruption at the highest levels in the state, business and the CCP. No serious flood mitigation action has been taken by government authorities since disastrous flooding in 1998, when 4,150 people died, or in 2010, which left 3,900 people dead or missing. Residents, meanwhile, have continually made scathing criticisms of the inadequacy of preventive measures.

The floods are not just a natural disaster. In the past, extensive flood plains were uninhabited, forming a natural defence against rising waters. A proper system of flood control was a popular demand of the Chinese Revolution in 1949, and under the Maoist regime a limited system of dykes and water reservoirs was built, providing some protection. These measures, however, have been completely overwhelmed by the anarchic development of China following capitalist restoration over the past three decades.

The indifference of the ruling elite to the conditions of ordinary people, including their exposure to floods and earthquakes, contrasts starkly with the enormous sums spent to prop up the financial system.

Beijing responded to the 2008 global financial crisis with a stimulus package of half a trillion dollars and a massive expansion of credit, estimated to be the equivalent of the entire US financial system. This has been used to fuel a frenzy of speculation in property

and shares, deepening the vast social gulf between a privileged ultra-wealthy layer and hundreds of millions of workers and rural poor.

Following the recent strike activity by sections of the working class, Beijing is worried about the potential for deepening political unrest. Despite tighter state censorship, the explosion of Internet and cell phone use has enabled hundreds of millions of people to communicate more freely. The regime has further clamped down on any independent reporting of what it deems “sensitive” current affairs topics. Online portals will be permitted to publish such material only if sourced from government-controlled news agencies.

Last Monday the government’s Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) revealed that it had moved against at least five major news web sites for publishing stories based on their own reportage. The “self-edited” web sites, according to the CAC, had engaged in “actions that seriously violated regulations and had a completely vile effect.”

Qiao Mu, a journalism professor at Beijing’s Foreign Languages University, told the *Guardian* last week that recent events meant that the Chinese government was nervous about losing control of the “media narrative.” “This has not been a quiet summer ... authorities are worried that reporting [on the floods and The Hague tribunal’s rejection of Chinese claims in the South China Sea] might have an effect on social stability,” he said.



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