

Over 200 killed in Sri Lankan floods, now cyclone hits Bangladesh

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After record southwestern monsoon rains caused massive damage in Sri Lanka last week, parts of eastern India and Bangladesh were hit by Cyclone Mora on Tuesday.

According to the latest figures, 203 people were killed in Sri Lanka, 96 remain missing and over 60 are seriously injured. The Disaster Management Centre reports that over 600,000 people have been affected. Around 1,500 houses are fully destroyed and 7,000 partially damaged.

Many areas are still unreachable due to floods and over 50 deadly landslides, with workers and the rural poor the hardest hit. This includes thousands of tea and rubber plantation workers in Agalawatta and adjoining areas in Western Province, and in the Ratnapura district.

Thousands of people face the threat of dengue fever, cholera, diarrhea and dysentery due to the lack of basic sanitary and health facilities and cramped conditions in makeshift survivors' camps. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has so far failed to provide a concrete plan to cope with the situation.

Save the Children Sri Lanka chief Chris McIvor told Reuters that water-borne diseases were a major concern because of the damp and crowded conditions. According to government estimates, 40 percent of those affected do not have access to safe drinking water. Dengue fever, which was already at epidemic proportions before the floods, is expected to worsen as mosquitoes find new breeding grounds.

Entire communities remained marooned by floodwaters. Many survivors are forced to sleep outside because their homes have been destroyed.

"Getting in to these communities is of the highest priority right now so we can find out exactly what the needs are and respond," McIvor said. He warned the

disaster could worsen over the coming days because last week's floods were just the beginning of the southwest monsoon season.

H. Jayanthan, a specialist physician, told the WSWs that "funguses affecting the base of fingers have already started to emerge amongst flood survivors and other skin diseases are also being reported." Older survivors, he added, "are contracting respiratory tract infections and others are complaining of fever."

Agricultural production has been heavily impacted, with thousands of acres of land under water. Sunil Withanage, 53, a teacher and part-time peasant from Akurukalavita in the Kalutara district, told the WSWs: "We've never seen floods like this in our lifetime. In this area alone, there is about 200 acres under water." Withanage explained that because of the previous drought, only an eighth of the available paddy land had been cultivated.

Molkava, Paragoda, Pahiyangala and Nikgaha in the Kalutara district were heavily affected, with the bodies of 30 people killed by floods and landslides so far found in the area. The first naval rescue boat did not reach the area until after midday Saturday, followed by a medical team with two doctors on Monday. Some areas are still inaccessible.

A WSWs correspondent who visited the district to see relatives explained it was a poverty-stricken rural area. Many residents worked in the plantations for a daily wage of around 400 rupees (\$US2.60) and others eked out an existence as small cultivators. Transport, even before the floods and landslides, was very difficult, with buses only running three times a day. The nearest, poorly-equipped and under-staffed hospital is eight miles away at Bulathsinhala.

Flood and landslide victims have no idea how they can rebuild their lives and bitterly denounced the fact

that they will receive little or no government assistance.

One villager told the WSWs: “My house was totally destroyed by the flood. I had a farm but now I’ll have to start from zero again. We’re afraid that there will be another flood, and don’t think there’s any point living here anymore, but we have nowhere else to go. All the governments and the authorities are responsible for these disasters.

“When the Kukule Ganga Project [an irrigation and hydro-electricity scheme] was about to start we opposed it because we knew about the damage that would be created by it. We heard that it was designed to send overflowing reservoir water into some other unpopulated area. The government didn’t allocate money to prevent that but chose easy methods.”

Inadequate state relief and Colombo’s refusal to develop measures to prevent or counteract the annual flood disasters have deepened anti-government sentiment.

President Maithripala Sirisena visited the Ratnapura district on Monday, holding discussions with ministers and officials. Sirisena then appeared on television, cynically declaring that the cabinet had decided not to buy luxury vehicles for government ministers this year, as if this represented a massive sacrifice.

India, in line with US geo-strategic policies, is attempting to strengthen its ties with Colombo. It has dispatched three naval ships with 300 navy personnel to assist in relief measures. This includes divers, medical teams and inflatable boats, as well as relief supplies, such as dry rations and blankets. The Chinese government has also announced \$US2.2 million in flood relief aid and Pakistan sent a shipload of relief goods and medical teams.

Washington, which played a major role in securing the presidency for Sirisena, has offered a pittance. The US ambassador Atul Keshap announced his government would only provide 15 million rupees (\$US98,000).

On Tuesday, Cyclone Mora hit Bangladesh, forcing hundreds of thousands from their homes and killing at least six people.

According to the Bangladesh Meteorological Department, 117 kilometer per hour winds struck the country between the fishing port of Cox’s Bazaar and Chittagong city. The department warned that these areas and other coastal districts were “likely to be

inundated” by a storm surge of four to five feet.

People in these areas were evacuated to shelters, schools and government offices. Fishing boats and trawlers were warned not to leave their ports and flights in many areas were cancelled.

According to Cox’s Bazaar’s chief administrator, Mohammad Ali Hussain, 17,500 houses were completely destroyed and 35,000 partially damaged in the district.

Refugee camps for Muslim Rohingyas who fled Burma to escape communal attacks from Buddhist supremacists, bore the brunt of the storm. Around 350,000 Rohingyas were living in flimsy shelters when the cyclone struck.

Although no deaths have been reported, “almost every shanty made of tin, bamboo and plastic has been flattened,” one refugee leader reported.



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