

Floods devastate Bangladesh and parts of India, killing more than 185

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26 June 2017

More than 185 people are reported dead in Bangladesh and northeast India from storms, floods and landslides caused by heavy rains that hit parts of India and Bangladesh in mid-June. Four soldiers who joined the rescue operations also died and one is still missing.

The Bangladesh landslides were the worst in the country's history, including in 2007, when 127 people were killed in southern Chittagong. According to Bangladeshi officials, Chittagong district received 343 mm of rain between June 13–14 and power was cut to the district, making the situation worse.

Some of those killed were buried in their homes during the night. According to media reports, villagers desperately attempted to dig the bodies out using shovels. Bangladesh disaster ministry secretary Shah Kamal told Reuters on June 14 that parts of the Chittagong district were still cut off.

Bangladesh's Awami League-led government took no action to prevent or minimise the flood and landslide damage. Those most affected are the rural poor, low-wage workers and rickshaw pullers living in flood- and landslide-prone areas where living costs are lower.

According to initial estimates by Bangladesh's disaster management department, the landslides mainly impacted on three hilly districts in southeast Bangladesh and resulted in the death of 110 people in Rangamati, 32 in Chittagong and six in Bandarban, with many still listed as missing. With search and rescue operations ongoing, these figures are expected to increase.

The Bangladesh government has mobilised military and security forces to deal with the disaster but a week later many soldiers were still unable to reach some remote districts. Department of disaster management chief Reaz Ahmed told the media: "Rescue operations are being hampered by bad weather while authorities

are still struggling to reach some remote areas."

Rangamati district fire services chief Didarul Alam said authorities were being contacted by survivors from several areas, saying people had been buried by landslides.

Alam said: "We did not have enough rescuers to send." He added: "We have been unable to reach some of the more remote places due to the rain. And even in the places we have reached, we have been unable to recover all the bodies." A group of about 60 rescue workers were trapped en route to Rangamati on Tuesday after landslides swamped the road.

One survivor Khatiza Begum, whose home was buried in a landslide, explained she was sheltering in a neighbour's house when it was hit by a second landslide. "A few other families also took shelter there, but just after dawn a section of hill fell on the house," she said. "Six people are still missing."

While heavy rains and thunder storms are an annual event in the region, the government makes no serious attempt to minimise the impact of landslides and flooding.

Just a few weeks earlier, Cyclone Mora hit Bangladesh, killing at least seven people and destroying hundreds of houses. Flimsy shelters at refugee camps, near the Burmese border and home to an estimated 350,000 Rohingya people, were also destroyed. The Rohingya have fled Burma to escape violent communal attacks by Buddhist supremacists and the security forces.

Bangladeshi authorities are trying to blame the victims. Syeda Sarwar Jahan, a spokesperson for the Chittagong local government, claimed local residents had ignored warnings. "We were able to issue warnings to most areas, but many people did not listen," she said. She even blamed survivors for the shortcomings of the

official rescue work, alleging: “We could not reach some areas because they were out of telephone range, while others did not respond to our calls.”

Apparel workers, rickshaw pullers and day labours live on the vulnerable hill slopes because they have no alternative. Even if they leave the area during the monsoon seasons, they are forced to return to the same areas because the rents are low, between Taka 1,500 (\$US18.61) to 6,000 per month.

Last week Bacchu Mia, 60, told the *Dhaka Tribune*: “I continue to be haunted by the deaths of my wife, three daughters and son, and I live in constant fear for my own life because another landslide can take place at any moment. But where else can I go? I used to be a rickshaw puller, but now I cannot do any work because of my asthma. The rent here is nominal, so I have no other option.” Seventeen people, including five of Mia’s family members, died in July 2011, when a portion of the hill protection wall collapsed.

Rokeya Begum, who has been living with his family in the area for three decades, said: “After every landslide, the government officials come in with a bunch of promises but soon forget all about us... The government could easily undertake a rehabilitation project for poor people like us who live in fear of landslides during every monsoon.”

According to a *New Age* editorial on June 15, more than 230 people have been killed in past ten years by landslides in Chittagong. It noted: “While the authorities carry out drives sporadically, and more around and at the time of the monsoon, to evict people living precariously at the crest, slope and foot of the hills in some areas, especially urban, such drives fail to bring about anything positive as the evicted are not properly rehabilitated.”

A major cause of these landslides is deforestation and land sales, for which the entire Bangladesh political establishment, including the ruling Awami League and the opposition Bangladesh National Party, are responsible.

As *New Age* acknowledged: “The situation has been further exacerbated by another group of influential people who keep extracting soil from the hills, and thus keep felling trees on the hills, for land and real estate development elsewhere and for the production of bricks at kilns. Shorn of trees and the original land structure, the hills lose the compaction of the soil when it rains

and they cannot hold themselves together, causing the landslides.”

Though not as severely affected as Bangladesh, floods in the bordering Indian states of Mizoram and Assam have resulted in up to 26 deaths, with many more still missing, and tens of thousands displaced.

Last month, Sri Lanka was devastated by heavy floods and landslides. Over 200 people were killed and more than 700,000 people displaced when the heavy monsoon rain occurred in late May. The whole crisis further underscores the fact that the ruling elites in the Indian sub-continent have no interest in providing for the basic needs of the masses.



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