

Deadly mudslide in Sierra Leone kills hundreds

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After a torrent of heavy rains early Monday morning caused massive flooding, a devastating mudslide completely buried an entire neighborhood and hundreds of people under tons of debris near the capital city Freetown.

Set off by torrential rains in the early morning hours on Monday, the mudslide buried a mass of shanty dwellings and has claimed scores of victims, with the confirmed death toll reaching 304 on Wednesday, with rescue efforts continuing. According to rescuers at the site, several hundreds more remain unaccounted for and are feared dead. Scores more are severely injured. It is one of Africa's deadliest natural disasters in recent memory.

The mudslide's brutal force of momentum gathered high on the slopes of Mount Sugar Loaf after the abnormally heavy rains which culminated into a snowball effect, propelling tons of enormous stones, boulders, mud, and debris which buried everything in its wake. The scale of the social catastrophe is only beginning to be understood.

Abubakarr Bah, a colonel with the Sierra Leone army leading the rescue effort, told the media Wednesday that the city morgue at Connaught Hospital was overwhelmed by the significant numbers of dead. He reported that so far the dead included 105 men, 83 women, and 109 children. It is estimated that as many as 600 are unaccounted for, and that this figure is likely to be an underestimate.

The scenes of the floodwaters and the mudslide's effects appearing in media reports are apocalyptic. The capital, Freetown, received more than double the amount of rain which typically falls between July 1 and August 13.

The heavy rains made literal rivers of streets in the Regent District and the towns beyond, although the

population living directly below Mount Sugar Loaf experienced the worst of the mudslide's destruction. This area is located five miles southeast of the capital and is home to some of the most impoverished residents in the country.

Housing in the district largely consists of little more than scraps of wood cobbled together with flimsy tin sheeting roof constructed into makeshift dwellings for the scores of residents, reflecting the severely impoverished conditions which the residents confront.

In the media, surviving residents agonizingly described family members buried alive under the mudslide.

Resident Alie Marah told Sky News, pointing to a large pile of debris, "My house is buried underneath there. There's nothing left. I've lost my brother, his wife and their five children. There used to be two hundred houses here. Now there is nothing".

James Chifwelu, the national director of the charity World Vision in Sierra Leone and part of the rescue effort, remarked on the "heartrending" experience of hearing the wails and moans of survivors trapped under piles of rubble.

"But it's most disturbing that many children in their school uniforms were unfortunately fatally caught up in the landslide and many more are homeless, orphaned and will be without food and clothing for days to come. This certainly calls for immediate action," Chifwelu said.

The deadly consequences of the catastrophic mudslide are nothing short of an indictment of the ruling government in Freetown.

For their part, the government of President Ernest Bai Koroma and other elected officials together with an assortment of religious leaders, made appearances before the public cynically employing religious piety

and crocodile tears for the victims in an attempt to conceal the ruling government's responsibility in overseeing the material conditions which made such a devastating mudslide possible.

The government, cynically calling for a moment of silence to honor the dead, trotted out bishop John Yambasu of the United Methodist Church to speak before a crowd gathered at the site of the mudslide. "We have been through 10 years of war, then Ebola and now this. Have mercy on Sierra Leone, Father."

Contradicting the attempt to obscure responsibility for the disaster by making appeals to God is the fact that the ruling Koroma government presides over a society of abject social misery for the Sierra Leone masses.

Koroma, a multimillionaire former insurance tycoon, and his clique in Freetown, came to power in 2007 promising to "open Sierra Leone up for business." This consisted of the wholesale removal of any obstacles or restrictions in making Sierra Leone and its working masses available for the profit of international banks and corporations.

Home to trillions of dollars in mineral deposits, including diamonds, gold and iron ore, Sierra Leone's mining industry rests atop a brutal system overseeing the exploitation of the workers toiling in the mining sector for poverty wages at the behest of the Western corporations extracting the significant mineral wealth for private profit.

That this wealth is expropriated for the profit of a tiny layer of wealthy parasites at the expense of spending for vital infrastructure to deal with natural disasters is an indictment of the capitalist government in Freetown.

Already ravaged by years of civil war and disease, including the recent 2014 outbreak of Ebola, the underdeveloped country of over 7 million is one of the poorest on earth, ranking 180 out of 187 on the Human Development Index.

Illustrating clearly the shocking level of social inequality in Sierra Leone are figures provided by the United Nations which document that more than 60 percent of the population resides in poverty. The reality is these numbers are likely much higher, as the poverty line is set at the absurdly low benchmark of \$1.25 per day. Young people aged 15-35, whom comprise around a third of Sierra Leone's population, cope with a 70 percent unemployment rate. Testifying to the lack

resources made available for education is a literacy rate of 41 percent.

Life expectancy at birth is at the shockingly low age of 48, while infant mortality is at a high of 89 per 1000 live births. The diseases which afflict the masses of Sierra Leone are largely due to lack of access to sanitation facilities for clean water and proper disposal of waste.

The responsibility for the lack of critical funding made available for decent housing and infrastructure rests squarely on the shoulders of the Koroma government. The corrupt lackeys ruling the country in Freetown act subserviently on the behalf of the Western corporations and banks responsible for extracting profits from the country's resources at the expense of its deeply impoverished population.



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