

South Asian floods kill more than 800 and affect over 24 million people

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Flooding has created havoc across India's northern and eastern states and neighbouring Bangladesh and Nepal, killing over 800 people, devastating hundreds of communities and impacting on millions of people throughout South Asia. Charities and NGOs are warning that contaminated water, food shortages and lack of decent accommodation will see outbreaks of dysentery and cholera.

In Bihar, India's worst-affected state, the official death toll is over 250. In neighbouring Uttar Pradesh over 340 have been killed, with almost half the state's 75 districts severely hit.

In West Bengal and Assam, in eastern and northeastern India respectively, over 180 have died and three million are affected. In Assam, almost half a million people are living in relief camps. Lightning storms in Odisha and Jharkhand have killed 21, while the north eastern states have reported large numbers of casualties.

Over 140 people have been killed and 30 are missing in Nepal, where 20 percent of the country's 28 million population suffered the worst flooding in the past 15 years.

In Bangladesh, over 115 people have lost their lives, more than 300,000 are displaced and at least 5.7 million people directly impacted. According to the country's flood forecasting and warning centre, some 30 percent of the country has been inundated in what have been described as the worst floods in a decade.

The catastrophic situation is expected to worsen, with the Indian Meteorological Department predicting more heavy rain. Last Friday, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said the flood was "fast becoming one of the most serious humanitarian crises this region has seen in many years" and called for "urgent action."

Late last month, over 220 people died and 450,000 people were hit by floods in India's western state of Gujarat. An estimated 39,000 people were shifted to higher ground and 11,400 people had been rescued as of August 1.

Millions of people in South Asia are hit by monsoonal flooding every year. But Indian governments, past and present, and their regional counterparts, have refused to implement any serious flood mitigation measures.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government were denounced in the parliament over their slow and insufficient response to floods. Opposition MPs accused the Hindu supremacist-led regime of discriminating against non-BJP state governments and not providing adequate financial assistance.

Minister of State for Home Affairs Kiren Rijiju denied the allegations. He arrogantly claimed the government planned to find a "permanent solution to floods" and "experts will help find a solution." Rijiju failed to explain why his government, which took office in May 2014, has done nothing to resolve the escalating annual human tragedy. Even more cynical was the fact that the government allocated a meagre one billion rupees (\$US15.6 million) "to find a permanent solution."

Last month, during floods in Assam which inundated 14 districts, displaced 200,000 people and killed over 70, Prime Minister Modi declared that Indian scientists had to "rise up to the challenges" created by the floods. He previously blamed the flooding on climate change.

While climate change is no doubt a factor in changing global weather patterns, his government refuses to take any real action to prevent the devastating impact of these catastrophes or provide adequate relief. Instead, it

spends billions of dollars upgrading the Indian armed forces in pursuit of the ruling elite's geo-political ambitions.

The Indian government's contemptuous attitude toward the poor was highlighted by a recent Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report revealing lengthy delays in flood mitigation measures.

According to the *Hindustan Times*, "the CAG report evaluated 206 Flood Management Programme projects, 38 flood forecasting stations, 49 River Management Activities and works related to Border Area projects and 68 large dams in 17 states and Union Territories between 2007 and 2016. They found 'inordinate delays' in almost a quarter of the projects, in the release of funds and ultimately the completion of projects ranging from 10 months to 13 years."

The CAG report also noted: "After two decades of investing in telemetry systems, that provide real-time data so that flood warnings can be issued, and investing of crores [tens of millions] of rupees, the government still depends on manual data."

Popular anger is rising among flood victims over the failure of authorities to provide adequate relief. On August 18, flood victims from Itahar, West Bengal, broke into a state food and supplies store and requisitioned food. There were also protests and demonstrations over inconsistent supply of relief material by the North and South Dinajpur districts administrators.

Pradip Dutta, a flood victim in Raiganj, told the media: "Not a single person from the district administration has come to help us." In Raiganj over 20,000 people have been displaced from their homes and at least six wards have been inundated by the flooded Kulik River.

Indian authorities have mobilised police to suppress the protests. According to media reports, police fired rubber bullets to break up a crowd of flood victims who demanded tarpaulins from administration officials. Bijoy Burman, a youth from Sripur of Itahar, was injured when police opened fire.

Gopi Nath Raha, a senior meteorologist at the Meteorological Centre in Gangtok, told the media that while his facility could predict rainfall patterns, it could not predict flash floods. "We can only issue a warning for heavy rainfall; the relief and disaster management is in the hands of the state government."

In another indication of the Modi government's contempt for flood survivors, New Delhi announced a "relief package" of just 5 billion rupees (\$78 million). It also promised to make an ex-gratia payment of 200,000 rupees (\$3,120) for the next of kin of those killed and 50,000 rupees to people seriously injured.

Coordinated flood mitigation and natural disaster management is blocked by the geo-political rivalry between the various bourgeois states in South Asia and the underlying capitalist profit system.



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