

Government indifference leads to vast death toll in South Asian floods

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An estimated 1,200 people have been killed and some 40 million more affected by floods that have swept through India, Bangladesh, and Nepal since mid-July. Millions have fled their homes. Thousands of schools and hospitals have been inundated and closed.

It is an indictment of the corporate and political elite throughout South Asia that despite annual human and social tragedies caused by heavy monsoons and floods, no serious measures have been put in place to protect ordinary people or social infrastructure from devastation.

The victims, largely from impoverished rural and urban populations, received virtually no assistance prior to the inundations, and have been abandoned by authorities since flood-waters hit. The callous response of governments throughout the region underscores their hostility to the welfare and social rights of ordinary people.

India's financial capital, Mumbai, has suffered its worst flooding since heavy monsoonal rains in 2005. That disaster claimed 500 lives, most of them in makeshift shanty towns.

For the fourth day in a row, Mumbai was virtually paralysed today, with road, rail and air transportation heavily affected. On Tuesday, the city was hit by over 200mm of rain, the largest daily fall in 12 years. The equivalent of eleven days of standard monsoonal rains fell in less than 12 hours.

Yesterday morning, at least 12 people were killed and another 14 injured when a five-story building collapsed in a congested lane in the Bhendi Bazaar area of southern Mumbai, amid torrential rains. Another 25 people are believed to be trapped beneath debris.

A nursery school was located on the building's ground floor. Infant children who attend the school had not yet arrived, meaning the death toll could have been

far higher.

Building collapses are a common occurrence in India during monsoonal rains. Construction companies frequently use sub-standard materials and violate basic safety regulations, often with the active complicity of building authorities.

Commenting on the devastation, one Reuters article noted: "Unabated construction on flood plains and coastal areas, as well as storm-water drains and waterways clogged by plastic garbage, has made the city increasingly vulnerable to storms."

According to the United Nations, more than 32 million people have been affected by the floods in India.

Save the Children reported that around 1.8 million throughout the South Asian region cannot go to school, after 18,000 school buildings were either destroyed or damaged by the floods. The charity warned that those children could be deprived of education permanently if it was not prioritized in relief measures. The indifferent attitude of the authorities to the disaster indicates that this is precisely what will happen.

In India's eastern state of Bihar, 514 people have been killed and 17.1 million affected by flood-waters, according to disaster management officials. In the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, about 2.5 million have been affected and the official death toll stood at 109 by Tuesday.

At least 140 people have perished in Bangladesh. More than 700,000 homes have been destroyed and vast areas of farm lands ruined, posing the risk of long-term food shortages. In Nepal, 143 people have died and more than 460,000 people have been forced to leave their homes due to the floods.

It is already clear that virtually nothing was done by governments throughout the region to prepare for the

inundation.

The failure of successive Indian governments to implement basic measures to mitigate the impact of annual floods is so blatant that the country's Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), an official body which audits government spending, felt compelled to issue critical comments last month.

A CAG report presented to the national parliament on July 21 stated: "There were huge delays in completion of river management activities and works related to border areas projects which were long-term solutions for the flood problems of Assam, north Bihar, and eastern Uttar Pradesh."

The report, titled "Schemes for flood control and flood forecasting," added: "Scientific assessment of flood-prone areas had not been completed in any of the 17 States/Union Territories [areas under direct control of central government]. Morphological studies, with a view to achieve better results in building, renovating and maintaining revetments, spurs and embankments to control and mitigate disasters caused by floods, were not completed by any of the 17 States/UTs."

The report revealed that only 349 of 4,862 large dams across the country had emergency action/disaster management plans as of March 2016. It stated that "programmes for maintenance of dams were not prepared and adequate funds were not provided to carry out structural/repair work."

It also stated: "Only 231 (5 percent) large dams evolved operating procedure/manuals. Out of 17 States/UTs, only two states had fully carried out the pre-monsoon and post-monsoon inspection of the dams, three states had carried out the inspections partially and remaining 12 states had not carried out these inspections."

The contents of the report are a damning indictment of successive governments, including those that have been led by the Indian National Congress, and the current Hindu supremacist administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Confronted with popular anger, Modi has frequently delivered hollow promises, and established a host of government bodies, that he claims will mitigate natural disasters. One of them, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) was established three years ago, and is directly headed by Modi.

The CAG report made clear that the NDMA and similar bodies, however, have been window-dressing to cover-up the barely concealed contempt of the authorities for the plight of ordinary people most heavily-affected by flooding.

This week, Modi made empty assurances, via Twitter, that the national government would assist authorities in the state of Maharashtra, where Mumbai is located, with "all possible support." Making clear that the victims of the disaster have been all but abandoned by the government, Modi also Tweeted to, "Urge the people of Mumbai and surrounding areas to stay safe and take all essential precautions in the wake of the heavy rain."

Aditya Thackeray, the leader of Shiv Sena, a far-right party aligned with the BJP government, contemptuously told the people of Mumbai: "It isn't a panic situation but only step outside your house [if it] is absolutely necessary."



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