

South Asian floods: Death toll climbs to 1,300

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While floods have partially receded in the Indian states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Assam, the death toll from the disaster is now 1,300, with an estimated 45 million people affected throughout South Asia.

Aid agencies report that 30 to 40 percent of those killed were children. Entire villages and vast tracts of agricultural land have been destroyed, along with crops and cattle. Tens of thousands of homes, schools and hospitals have been inundated and damaged.

Millions of flood victims in rural and urban areas face a desperate plight, trying to recover from the loss of their homes, crops, livestock, livelihoods and property. This situation is worsened by a deepening health crisis caused by infected water and the spread of mosquito- and water-borne diseases.

Ray Kancharla from the Indian branch of Save the Children warned of a massive increase in dengue, malaria, chikungunya and other mosquito-borne diseases this year. “These risks are huge,” he said, “especially for children and women.” Save the Children estimates that 17 million children in India urgently require humanitarian assistance, including basic nutritional support, health care and education.

While government authorities and the media constantly refer to the floods as a “natural disaster,” these catastrophes are entirely predictable and generally occur each year during the monsoon season, between June and September.

According to the UN, over 32 million people have been affected by the floods in India. In the eastern state of Bihar, 514 people have been killed and 17.1 million impacted, while in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, about 2.5 million have been affected and 109 killed.

Between June and July, heavy floods in the western state of Gujarat took 224 lives. In the eastern state of West Bengal, at least 152 were killed and 2.7 million people affected. The West Bengal government estimates the total damage in that state to be 140 billion

rupees (\$US2.2 billion).

On August 29, Mumbai, India’s financial capital, received 331.4 mm of rainfall in nine hours, the highest in a decade, producing chaotic conditions, inundating thousands of buildings and resulting in the loss of five lives.

In Bangladesh, at least 140 people have perished, with more than 700,000 homes destroyed and vast areas of farm lands ruined, posing the risk of long-term food shortages. More than 8 million people, including about 3 million children, have been displaced and about 2.4 million hectares of cropland have been ruined.

According to the Bangladesh International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, around 13,000 people are suffering from diarrhea, with officials warning that the infection rate is serious.

At least 23 people, including seven children, were killed by flooding in the Pakistani port city of Karachi when wide areas were engulfed on September 1, following prolonged rainfall that began on August 30.

In Nepal 160 people were killed, 25 are missing and 1.5 million homes, along with schools, hospitals and bridges, were destroyed. One UNICEF official reported: “The people are very poor here and houses are made of mud. So when floods came, it washed away their houses, and in some places, the water came so quickly, [and] with such force, that one village I saw looked like [it had been] hit by a tornado or cyclone.”

The Indian government and its respective state authorities are indifferent to the plight of millions of residents. Despite countless warnings from weather forecasters and disaster planning experts, successive governments have refused to implement basic mitigation measures to deal with flooding.

After major flooding in 2005, Mumbai authorities were warned they had to improve drainage systems, develop early warning systems, widen waterways and riverbeds and amend building codes. Twelve years on

these demands largely have been ignored.

A recent report by India's Comptroller and Auditor General, an official body that audits government spending, revealed that only 349 of India's 4,862 large dams have emergency disaster action plans, and tens of millions of dollars in flood management funds remain unspent.

The Indian government has offered a pittance in emergency relief to flood victims. While total recovery costs for the flood-affected northeast states are estimated at 300 billion rupees, the government is providing only 23.5 billion rupees.

By contrast, New Delhi, in pursuit of geo-political interests, is spending billions of dollars on advanced military weapons in preparation for war, thus threatening the lives of millions throughout the region.

India recently issued a "request-for-information" to Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Kawasaki Heavy Industries for an estimated \$8 billion contract to supply six advanced submarines.

New Delhi's offer to provide 400 million Nepali rupees to the landlocked country of Nepal in flood relief is not driven by humanitarian concerns but motivated by the Indian elite's hegemonic ambitions. The ruling elite, which is engaged in strategic rivalry with China over influence in Nepal, regards the poverty-stricken, mountainous country as part of its backyard.



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