

Floods in Greece claim 23 lives

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Greek authorities are still surveying the extent of damage caused by flash floods in the Thriasian plain of West Attica. On Monday, the death toll rose to 23 as two more fatalities were announced. One body was found buried in mud near a bus station in the small town of Mandra, west of Athens, and an injured woman died in hospital.

The plain is located approximately 25 km west of Athens and is bounded by Mount Egaleo to the east, Mount Parnitha the north, Mount Pateras to the west, and the Bay of Elefsina to the south.

The towns affected are Mandra, Magoula and Nea Peramos, which are built on the floodplains of a number of different streams. Western Attica's population is overwhelmingly working class and the region is home to the port of Elefsina as well as many industrial plants including the Skaramangas shipyards, oil refineries, quarries, logistic plants and steel mills.

The floods were caused by six hours of rainfall over the slopes of Mount Pateras during the early hours of November 15. According to reports, the recorded rainfall was over 200 millimetres, more than half the annual average and over 3 times the average for the month of November. The rain led to streams in the area bursting their banks.

Twelve people remain hospitalised, while according to the latest tally drawn up by the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure the number of buildings that have sustained damage that warrants compensation stands at around 1,500; over 70 percent are residential.

According to some reports the number of victims could be a lot higher since although there is currently only one person listed as missing, there are unofficial reports of people who are unaccounted for in neighbourhoods inhabited by immigrant workers, mainly from Pakistan.

The town of Mandra, which is built on the floodplains of the streams Soures and Agia Ekaterini, sustained the

most damage and the overwhelming majority of those reported killed.

Speaking to *Kathimerini*, 21-year-old Mandra resident Thomas Bono described how he was woken by the sound of the water flowing down from Pateras: "I looked out of the window and saw the torrent washing the cars one after the other." He went on to describe how he and his father tried in vain to stop the water from breaking down the wooden door of their kitchen: "Everytime I close my eyes I see the image of the water throwing us [across the room to the opposite wall]."

Syriza Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras attributed the disaster to climate change blandly stating that "We all have a responsibility to tackle this global phenomenon."

While climate change is indeed making extreme weather events more frequent, flooding has been a chronic problem in Western Attica for many decades. The last floods in the area occurred just two years ago and claimed the lives of three people.

The latest floods have therefore again exposed the absence of any coordinated town planning and inadequate anti-flood infrastructure in the area.

Speaking to *Proto Thema*, Emeritus Professor of Geology at Athens University Dimitris Papanikolaou stated that the town of Mandra has long served as a case study for his students "as a characteristic case where human intervention, ignorance, indifference or at any rate a lack of knowledge and a material engagement with the issue was of a criminal character."

In a separate interview with the *Guardian*, Papanikolaou recounted how "in 1996 we had two victims in the same area [of Mandra] precisely because the flow of water had been blocked... Nature had already warned that such intervention was disastrous, that not maintaining the natural flow of water was disastrous."

While many reports have tried to shift the blame on

poor residents who built their homes without planning permission, much of the town of Mandra has in fact been constructed legally. According to *Kathimerini* “the Agia Ekaterini stream that caused most of the damage is not [officially] deemed to be within the bounds of the town, given that the 1989 General Urban Plan allowed construction on its riverbed (therefore the houses that were built there are legal).”

Kathimerini also highlighted how legislation was further relaxed in 2014 by giving the private sector the ability to participate in the setting of floodplain boundaries by carrying out its own studies.

This must be seen in the wider context of the attacks on what little urban planning there was by legislation that provided conditions for the successive bailout packages imposed on Greece by the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund since 2009.

Following the demands of the IMF for “a smaller state” the Public Corporation of Urban Planning and Housing (DEPOS) was abolished, which apart from urban planning was also responsible for the resettlement of people whose houses had been built without planning permission.

In 2011 the legislation that established the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund, whose main function was to sell off state assets to the private sector, also stipulated that existing urban planning regulations could be nullified to allow for the establishment of frameworks that form part of specific investment initiatives. In 2014 there was a further attack on urban planning with the abolition of the Organisations for Regulatory Planning and Environmental Protection in the cities of Athens, Thessaloniki and Ioannina.

Commenting on this in the aftermath of the flood, economist Gerasimos Potamianos wrote, “With the weakening of urban planning in the depth of the crisis and under the pressure of economic (revenue) needs... could see the promotion of private plans and opportunist solutions that serve momentary interests using economic development as a pretext.”

The floods in Western Attica are a further indictment of the Syriza-led government, which was swept into power in January 2015 on an anti-austerity ticket only to betray its mandate months later by signing a third bailout package with the EU and the IMF shortly after the overwhelming rejection of austerity in a July 2015

referendum.

In October 2014, when it was in opposition in the aftermath of the floods that devastated much of Attica, Syriza released a statement that attributed the devastation to “the consequence of the total and chronic abandonment for many decades by successive ND [New Democracy] and PASOK governments.”

Syriza now presides over a similar situation, with residents and volunteers left to clean up after the disaster, abandoned by the government. Attica Prefect and Syriza member Rena Dourou has come under attack for failing to make good her promises to construct anti-flood defences in the city of Mandra, for which a blueprint had existed since 2015 with an estimated cost of €11 million.



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