Floods and landslides in Japan leave more than 100 dead

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Torrential rains in southwestern Japan that began Thursday and continued over the weekend led to devastating floods and landslides. At least 126 people are dead as of Tuesday morning. Several dozen more remain missing. At the height of the emergency, at least 5.9 million people were advised to evacuate and hundreds of homes have been destroyed. Such natural disasters are becoming increasingly common in Japan.

In total, 19 prefectures have been affected, with the Hiroshima prefecture being one of the worst hit. At least 30,000 people took refuge in shelters and, as of Monday night, a third of those are still unable to return home. In many cases, cities were struck with record rainfall for the entire month of July in the span of just a few hours. Uwajima, in Ehime prefecture, for example, received 364 millimeters of rain in two hours, or 1.5 times the monthly average.

Masanori Hiramoto, a 68 year-old farmer from Mihara in Hiroshima prefecture, was one of those who evacuated. Heading towards the local shelter, which has only two rooms, he and his wife found it full already and ended up spending the night at a highway rest stop. He remarked to the *Japan Times* on the flooding, "I have lived here all my life. I have never seen anything like this."

The Japanese central government's response to the disaster has been typical. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called for "all-out efforts" in conducting search and rescue operations. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said, "The record rainfalls in various parts of the country have caused rivers to burst their banks, and triggered large scale floods and landslides in several areas." He said nothing about what could have been done to predict the devastating storms. Some 73,000 personnel, including police, firefighters and military troops have been mobilized to conduct rescue operations.

However, inadequate planning and resources to prevent flooding and protect lives lies at the heart of what makes this and other recent disasters so devastating. Dozens were killed in mudslides last July while in August 2014 Hiroshima was hit by mudslides that killed 74 after then-record rainfall. In 1999, 32 people were killed in mudslides in the same region.

Between 1999 and 2014, the government supposedly undertook measures to prevent a reoccurrence of the 1999 disaster. However, Mitsuharu Hiura, an official with the Sediment Control Division of the prefectural government, said in 2014, "We couldn't finish the infrastructure work due to a large number of dangerous locations and limited budget."

In other words, the financial resources in the world's third largest economy were not made available to protect people's lives. It has become clear over the last four years that nothing has changed to address the danger of mudslides or improve Japan's aging levee system. In addition, while annual landslides and floods claiming people's lives have become the norm, the central government has cut funding to prefectures that would have strengthened flood and landslide prevention infrastructure.

Furthermore, the criteria to designate areas as landslide-prone have not changed over the last decade. This is despite people being killed by landslides in areas considered safe, including during the 2011 earthquake that resulted in the Fukushima disaster. As a result, people living or working in those areas still do not have adequate warning in the event of mudslides from increasingly dangerous rain storms.

The threat that Tokyo faces is growing. In fact, parts of the city have sunk by 15 feet over the past century. In March, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government

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released a report stating that one-third of Tokyo could be flooded, potentially impacting at least four million people, in the event of a super-typhoon hitting the city. The local government claimed it would update evacuation measures and the distribution of warning messages.

Tokyo has a massive subterranean system to divert flood waters. Construction began in the early 1990s when the government was spending on public works programs and was completed in 2006 at a cost of $2 billion. The frequency of rainfall over 76.2 millimeters an hour has increased by 70 percent over the last three decades in Japan. But the price tag, a drop in the bucket compared to what is spent on war preparations, has caused the government to balk at establishing similar systems in other parts of the country.

Japan's national warning system, known as J-Alert, has also been criticized in the past for being ineffective. While it is unclear whether or not problems with this system contributed to the loss of life over the weekend, it has been too slow to notify people during other events and has even sent false messages. In other cases, people receiving the messages have complained that the appropriate infrastructure is not in place for those seeking shelter. The elderly and small children are especially affected as they cannot move quickly.

More intense storms and other extreme weather patterns are hitting Japan and other countries throughout the Asia-Pacific as climate change takes its toll. According to the International Panel on Climate Change, 12 million people in 23 coastal cities in Japan, China, and Korea live in low elevation regions at risk of major flooding in the future. Some 250 million people throughout Southeast and South Asia, mostly poor rural farmers, live in low-lying regions with millions at risk of being displaced by 2050.

The Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research reported in January that 156 million people in Asia will be at risk from flooding due to climate change within the next 20 years. Millions more in Africa, the Americas, and Europe will similarly be affected.

The response to climate change and the resulting disasters like the flooding and mudslides in Japan this past weekend demonstrates that there is no solution to this growing crisis under capitalism. Only under the rational, socialist planning of society on an international basis can climate change be genuinely addressed and lives protected from natural disasters.

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