

Extreme weather in Japan has deadly impact on the elderly

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Extreme weather in Japan continues to claim lives as more than 77 people have died during a heatwave in which temperatures reached record highs. This comes on the heels of massive flooding and landslides caused by torrential rains that left over 210 people dead, the most in such a disaster in 35 years.

Temperatures have been as high as 41.4 degrees Celsius in Tokyo and have impacted the continued clean-up operations in the southwestern part of the country following the floods. AccuWeather analyst Joel Myers warned that the real death toll is “likely already in the hundreds despite the official toll of somewhat more than two dozen,” a result of the more indirect effects of the heat wave on one’s health.

The death toll is the latest example of a pattern of inadequate preparation for extreme weather as seen in previous natural disasters in Japan. In these cases, the elderly often bear the brunt and this year has been no different, with older people and retirees being the majority of those killed in the heat wave and floods.

Many apartments and schools lack air conditioning or centrally controlled climate systems meaning that people do not have access to cooling centres, particularly workers and the poor who cannot afford private air conditioning units. Eleven people, mostly elderly, died on Saturday alone.

Similar patterns are seen amongst the flood victims. In reporting on the fatalities, the *Japan Times* noted that of the 169 identified victims, as of July 15, 118 were over the age of 60. Even more shockingly, the *Financial Times* reported that in the town worst hit by the floods, Mabi, located in Okayama Prefecture, only 1 of the 40 confirmed deaths was under the age of 62.

In explaining the high proportion of deaths, both Japanese media outlets and the government have sought to shift blame on to the elderly, claiming in the case of

the floods that they failed to heed warnings and evacuate in time. When asked to comment, one senior government official reportedly said “I think Japan is going to have to recognise that old people either cannot, or do not want to, follow the textbook procedures in a crisis.”

Others have attributed the deaths as an inevitable part of the ageing demographic of Japan, which now has the largest proportion of elderly people in the world, with more than one-quarter over the age of 65. Such explanations were contradicted by revelations of the inadequate measures taken by local and federal Japanese authorities in providing adequate warning and evacuation during the storm, an issue seen consistently in prior natural disasters.

As Professor Shiro Maeno, of Okayama University, an expert on river engineering noted, “There was no way the elderly and the disabled could have been evacuated with an order that was past midnight [only a few hours before the disaster struck]. The response should have come much earlier.”

In Mabi, residents were only given minutes to evacuate due to a delay in issuing the necessary warnings. Compounding this, in some cases, many elderly individuals simply had nowhere to go. Evacuees from around Japan reported that some shelters were either too small or were already full when they arrived.

Mabi residents also reported that the government delayed for decades implementing appropriate flood-control plans, and upgrading early warning systems, with construction of appropriate defences planned to start only later this year despite the project being approved in 2010.

Poor planning and criminal negligence are the norm, not the exception. With each disaster, the government issues empty platitudes while doing nothing to make

genuine improvements. When eastern Japan was struck by the devastating 2011 Tokoku earthquake and tsunami, resulting in the nuclear disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, roughly two-thirds of the nearly 16,000 killed were over the age of 60.

Invariably, the bulk of the burden and suffering caused by such negligence and misappropriation of public wealth is borne by the working class and the poor. Due to the decades-long economic stagnation of Japan, coupled with intensifying attacks by the ruling elite against living and working conditions, poverty rates have increased across most age-groups since the 1980s.

Current rates of old-age poverty in Japan are estimated at roughly 20 percent, one of the highest in the developed world and nearly double the OECD average of 12.5 percent. However, certain layers of elderly workers, particularly single women have been hit even more severely, with poverty rates in that group reaching 40 percent for divorced women, a product of the regressive measures of Japan's welfare system that penalizes unmarried women.

Like the current generation of youth and middle-aged workers, who have often had years of insecure employment, the poverty rates for the elderly will worsen. This social reality is met with indifference, if not outright hostility, by the Japanese governments who refuse to provide workers with any real support once they have outlived their "usefulness" as sources of exploitation.

Contrary to Tokyo's claims that an aging society means that no money will be available for social programs, the Japanese government, while providing tax cuts for the wealthy and large corporations, has embarked upon massive re-militarization. Earlier this year, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party proposed to double its military spending to two percent of GDP, which would make it the third-largest military spender in the world.



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