

Unprecedented monsoonal floods kill over 370 in southwest India

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More than 370 people have been killed and some two million displaced by flash flooding and landslides caused by heavy monsoonal rains which began on August 8 in the southwest Indian state of Kerala.

Twelve of the state's 14 districts have been inundated, in what has been described as Kerala's worst disaster since 1924. Crop and property damage is estimated at about 80 billion rupees (\$US1.146 billion), with 20,000 homes and 40,000 hectares of agricultural crops destroyed and at least 83,000 kilometres of roads damaged.

Most of the fatalities occurred when entire villages were wiped out by catastrophic landslides. Tens of thousands of flood victims are currently being accommodated in over 4,000 relief camps.

According to state government officials, tens of thousands remain marooned, including up 5,000 people trapped in the riverside town of Chengannur. Authorities also fear outbreaks of water-borne diseases like diarrhoea, cholera, dysentery, typhoid and leptospirosis could take more lives.

Although flood waters subsided in most areas on Sunday, and official "red alert" warnings were lifted in most of the state, dam levels remain dangerously high. The Indian Meteorological Department has also warned that rain will continue falling on the state until August 23, with heavy downpours forecast for the districts of Idukki, Kozhikode and Kannur. Idukki, which has received more than 321 centimetres of rain since June, is now virtually cut off from the rest of the state.

In an attempt to downplay the extent of the disaster, Kerala Chief Minister Vijayan, of Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, told the media: "What prevails in Kerala is not a situation that is getting out of control ... Things have improved a lot."

Notwithstanding Vijayan's claims, tens of thousands throughout the state are stranded in their homes surrounded by floods or in relief camps without food, drinking water and medicine.

Flood survivor Inderjeet Kumar, 20, who is currently at a church shelter in Thrissur district, told an AFP reporter: "These were the scariest hours of our life ... There was no power, no food and no [drinking] water—even though water was all around us."

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a clear indication of the Indian elite's contempt for the flood victims, said the central government would provide just five billion rupees (\$US72 million) in aid. This is less than half of the 12 billion rupees requested by the state government. In line with the prime minister's usual practice, Modi took a helicopter flight over some of the flood-hit areas on Friday.

UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric declared that he was "saddened" by the disaster but, when asked if the UN would be providing relief funds, said India had not specifically asked for any help.

The media has reported that thousands of people, including women, children and college students across Kerala, are collecting food, medicine, clothes and other essentials to be sent to the relief camps. An estimated 600 fishermen from the Kerala coast are also involved in rescuing flood victims.

The state usually receives about 1,649 millimetres in monsoon rain at this time of year, but some 2,344 millimetres has already fallen. The disastrous levels of flooding are also unprecedented and not a "natural" event.

Indian governments of every political colouration—from Modi's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) to the main opposition Congress Party or the Stalinist CPM, which currently rules

Kerala—are responsible for the current human catastrophe. Preoccupied with maximising profits for foreign and local investors, these governments have refused to provide the necessary flood-mitigation and emergency rescue infrastructure.

Environmental experts have declared that the current Kerala floods are a “man-made disaster” and pointed to illegal constructions on river beds and unauthorised quarrying.

Ecologist Madhav Gadgil, 76, the former head of the Indian government-constituted Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), told the media that although Kerala has had heavy monsoon rains, the current flooding and landslides have not been experienced before.

In 2011, the WGEEP recommended that several areas in Kerala should be classified as ecologically sensitive. The report said several areas were vulnerable to floods because of quarrying, mining, illegal re-purposing of forests and high-rise building constructions. It called for strict restrictions on these dangerous practices.

Kerala state governments, led by Congress from 2011 to 2016 and by the Stalinist CPM since 2016, rejected these recommendations and allowed the environmentally hazardous practices identified by WGEEP to continue.

“The flooding has definitely brought to light the existence of illegal stone quarries or a large number of unauthorised constructions on river beds,” Gadgil said. “In this sense, it is definitely a man-made calamity where intense rainfall and human intervention have made it a serious disaster.”



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