

India: Kerala floods death toll climbs to 445

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The official number of those killed in the worst floods that the southern Indian state of Kerala has faced in nearly a century now stands at 445. Of the two million flood victims, almost one million people remain in more than 2,780 relief camps, with little prospect of returning to their homes in the near future.

Millions of Kerala residents now face the danger of water-borne diseases, such as cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery, typhoid and leptospirosis, along with bites from poisonous snakes and other reptiles, which are expected to push up the current death toll.

Those able to return to their homes face immense difficulties due to the lack of electricity and drinking water. About 50 electricity sub-stations and over 16,158 transformers have been seriously damaged, cutting power to more than 2.5 million properties.

While water levels are receding, more than 100,000 houses need to be fully rebuilt, a task that will have to be undertaken by flood victims, as government authorities have virtually abandoned the survivors. Last Wednesday a 68-year-old man committed suicide after he was taken to the remains of his home at Kothad in Ernakulam district. Earlier in the week, a 19-year-old boy took his own life because his school certificates were destroyed by the floods.

Kerala's transport system has been seriously impacted with about 11,000 kilometres of roads and 237 bridges damaged. A final estimate of the toll on the state's agricultural sector cannot be made yet because state officials have not been able to reach many of the flooded areas. Over 10,000 hectares are flood damaged at a cost of 5.728 billion rupees (\$82 million) in the hardest-hit Idukki district, which produces cardamom, pepper, tea, fruit and vegetables.

Initial estimates of the cost of the Kerala disaster currently stand at 200 billion rupees (\$3 billion), but officials have warned that the final amount will be more than twice that figure. United Nations

Development Programme senior advisor G. Pramod Kumar told the media: "The total loss will probably run into billions of dollars. Think about Mississippi, Katrina and the Thailand floods—they all ran into tens of billions of dollars. Finding money to recover from this level of damage is difficult."

The massive social destruction in Kerala, however, is a direct result of political decisions made by India's ruling elite. Successive Indian governments, at central and state levels, all share the blame, having refused to provide badly needed flood-control infrastructure. Instead they have diverted government resources to providing facilities and tax breaks for foreign and local big business investors.

India's central and Kerala state governments, whether led by the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party, the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the Congress Party, have promoted highly profitable construction, mining and deforestation industries without any consideration of their dangerous environmental impact.

In the aftermath of the disaster, all factions of the ruling elite are attempting to divert popular anger by shifting responsibility onto their political rivals.

The CPM-led Kerala state government, for example, is blaming neighbouring Tamil Nadu for the flood. In an affidavit submitted to the Indian Supreme Court on August 23, Kerala Chief Secretary Tom Jose said: "The sudden releases from the Mullaperiyar Dam, the third largest reservoir in the Periyar Basin, forced us (Kerala) to release more water from the Idukki reservoir, downstream of Mullaperiyar, which is one of the causes of this deluge."

The Tamil Nadu state government rejected the Kerala government's allegations. Mullaperiyar Dam is located in Kerala but its operations are controlled by Tamil Nadu. This has been the source of regional chauvinist conflict between the two states for decades.

Congress Party state opposition leader Oommen Chandy blamed the current CPM-led state government for the floods, accusing it of not releasing water from Idukki dam “until the last minute” and causing “huge damage to life and properties.”

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan rejected these accusations, claiming they were “misleading,” “baseless” and that emergency warnings were issued “before the dams were opened.”

Irrespective of Chandy’s claims, the previous Congress Kerala state government, which he led, is equally responsible for the disaster. Both state governments refused to act on recommendations by the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) in 2011. The Indian government-appointed agency identified future flood dangers and called for tight restrictions to be placed on quarrying, mining, illegal repurposing of forests and high-rise building constructions.

The Kerala government has called on the BJP-led central government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to provide 20 billion rupees (\$287 million) in emergency assistance. Modi, however, has provided just 6 billion rupees (\$86 million). He also rejected \$100 million of aid offered by the United Arab Emirates, stating that India would not accept any assistance from a foreign government and had enough resources to deal with the disaster.

Last Wednesday, Raveesh Kumar, a spokesman for India’s ministry of external affairs, told the media: “In line with the existing policy, the government is committed to meeting the requirements for relief and rehabilitation through domestic efforts.”

The CPM-led Kerala state government has denounced the BJP government’s response. Kerala’s finance minister Thomas Isaac told the media the central government’s reaction was “political discrimination” against “a leftist government.”

Appearing on Manorama News channel’s “Liveathon” programme, Kerala CPM Chief Minister Vijayan called on Kerala residents to donate a month’s salary to help rebuild the flood damaged state. “All those who have lost their houses should be provided new ones,” he said. “Damaged houses should be repaired. The government, however, cannot carry out these tasks on its own.”

In other words, the economic burden of repairing the

homes and basic facilities of millions of flood survivors in Kerala is to be placed on the backs of the working class.



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