

India: Kerala residents face ongoing impact of floods

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Millions of residents face an ongoing struggle to survive following the worst floods in the south Indian state of Kerala in nearly a century. According to government estimates, 10,000 kilometres of roads and hundreds of bridges have been destroyed, about 100,000 homes and residential buildings seriously damaged, and millions of hectares of agricultural crops lost.

More than one million people remain in over 2,700 relief camps, with no hope of returning to normal life in the near future. Flood survivors are continuing to arrive at the camps. Most had returned to their homes only to find them uninhabitable and they could not afford to repair or rebuild them.

At Kothad, in Ernakulam district, a 68-year-old man committed suicide on seeing his wrecked house and a 19-year-old boy killed himself after seeing his school certificates had been destroyed by the floods. These are just a few immediate indications of the trauma affecting hundreds of thousands people.

The official death toll is now over 480. This could rise further as a result of water-borne diseases, such as cholera, diarrhea, dysentery, typhoid, and leptospirosis, as well as fatal bites from poisonous reptiles. According to state authorities, more than 5,100 people have acute diarrhea.

Leptospirosis, known as rat fever, had reportedly taken 26 lives by September 2 in the Kozhikode, Malappuram, Palakkad and Thiruvananthapuram districts. The health ministry said the number of suspected leptospirosis cases had risen to 800 since mid-August. They are also facing shortages in Kerala of the drugs used to fight leptospirosis and similar diseases.

According to the media, there were at least 60 leptospirosis cases in Kozhikode district, one of the state's worst-hit areas. The Kozhikode Municipal

Corporation is reported to have only about 500,000 preventive tablets in stock.

The corporation's health officer, R.S. Gopakumar, told the media that the district needs about 3 million tablets in the next two months. In an attempt to downplay the crisis, Kerala's director of health service, R.L. Saritha said: "Supply shortages are being replenished. Of course, the demand has shot up, but we are monitoring daily."

Huge losses have been suffered by industries in Kerala. Food processing, timber, plywood, healthcare units, chemical plants, rice mills and plantations, including coffee, rubber, tea, ginger, black pepper, cardamom and nutmeg, are among those most heavily-hit.

Hundreds of thousands of workers are attached to mostly small- and medium-scale industries that have been unable to resume production and have lost their jobs. The wage loss in the month of August alone is estimated at 40 billion rupees (\$US552 million), with over 3.3 million workers stood down or sacked in Idukki, Ernakulam, Alappuzha, and Kottayam.

Dalit and tribal communities, already the most socially and economically oppressed layers, are severely affected. Assistant Professor T. Abhilash from the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram told the media: "In terms of numbers and data, their losses may not count much, but considering the fact that most of them will have to rely solely on government aid to rebuild devastated houses and property, and given the slow pace with which such funds flow in, they will have to wait for a long time till their life is sorted out."

Kerala's ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) claims it is providing necessary assistance to flood victims. But its

meagre 10,000-rupee (\$US140) urgent relief grants have been denied to the vast majority of flood victims on the pretext that they have failed to provide bank account details. Tens of thousands of flood victims lost this information in the deluge. Less than 5,000 of the 391,494 families who can claim this relief have received it.

In a clear indictment of the arrogance and indifference of the entire Indian ruling class, including the LDF government in Kerala, authorities failed to address the recommendations of ecological experts for flood prevention in the wake of the disaster to organise urgently needed relief and rehabilitation measures.

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan covered up for the right-wing Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led Indian government, which gave just 6 billion rupees in initial financial assistance to the state. The Kerala state government had requested 20 billion rupees.

Vijayan apologised for the BJP administration, telling the *Hindu* newspaper: “Central aid never comes in one disbursal; it comes in phases. What the Centre has announced is only advance assistance, and it’s a good amount. When the Union home minister visited the state, he announced Rs. 100 crore [1 billion rupees]. Later the prime minister announced Rs. 500 crore [5 billion rupees]. That’s different from normal assistance, and it shows how supportive the Centre has been towards Kerala.”



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