

Millions displaced and hundreds killed by monsoonal floods in South Asia

Rohantha De Silva
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Heavy monsoonal rains that began in early July have battered the lives of millions of people in Nepal, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Though the weather situation has improved, social conditions will worsen in the coming period, with livelihoods and dwellings devastated and increased risks of disease outbreaks.

While current reports indicate that around 600 people have been killed across these countries, the real figure may well be higher because many casualties go unreported. UN estimates show that over 25 million people have been displaced, with the majority being poor people living a hand-to-mouth daily existence.

India is the worst affected. According to an NDTV report on Monday, 170 people were killed and nearly 11 million impacted by flooding in the Indian states of Assam and Bihar. More than 100 of these deaths occurred in Bihar, India's poorest state.

In the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, 32 people were killed by lightning strikes on Sunday, while 2,283 villages in 18 of the 33 flood-hit districts of the state remain under water. Food production has been shattered and thousands of villagers rendered homeless.

Last Thursday an express train near Mumbai, the capital of Maharashtra state, was stranded for more than 12 hours when a river burst its banks and submerged rail lines. Indian navy helicopters and emergency boats rescued around 1,000 passengers.

In Assam, over 180 animals, including 16 rhinos, died in Assam's Kaziranga National Park.

At least 113 deaths have been reported in Nepal, with 38 people still missing due to serious flooding and landslides in the mountainous state.

Massive destruction has occurred in the eastern parts of the country. Many bridges and roads have collapsed or been washed away. The repair bill is estimated to be more than 300 million Nepal rupees (\$US2.7 million).

In Bangladesh, over 75 people were killed and more than six million displaced in 28 districts, but with many still reported missing, the death toll will be higher. The Jamuna River embankment was breached on July 17, flooding at least 40 villages and inundating the dwellings of over 200,000 people.

Rohingya refugees from Burma or Myanmar have been badly affected because most of their settlements are located in the flood-prone areas, such as the Cox's Bazar area near Dhaka. At least 6,000 refugees are now homeless following the destruction of their makeshift huts.

Parts of Pakistan are also flooded, with 23 reported dead, and in Sri Lanka, nine people have been killed and over 540 badly impacted.

South Asian governments have responded with a combination of apathy and indifference toward the millions of poverty-stricken people affected by the floods and now desperately attempting to survive the aftermath. In some areas there has been no government aid or assistance whatsoever.

According to the Indian media, Prime Minister Narendra Modi telephoned the chief ministers of Assam and Bihar states and instructed them to initiate relief measures. Likewise in Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheik Hasina issued ritual instructions.

On Monday, Reuters reported that Foyez Ahmed, the deputy commissioner of Bogra district in Bangladesh, declared that although the district had relief supplies, "we don't have adequate transport facilities to move to the areas that are deep underwater."

Some media reports indicate that anger is mounting among flood victims over ongoing government failures to prepare for the annual flooding.

In the northern Indian state of Bihar, residents chased away a circuit officer on July 19 for failing to distribute

relief material. Residents in the state's Motihari district, near the Nepal border, told journalists that no health officer had visited the area, no community kitchen had been organised, and children had been suffering from hunger for five to six days.

The BBC reported that protesting villagers chanted slogans denouncing the government and said they were "abandoned every monsoon season."

Heavy monsoonal rains, which trigger devastating floods and landslides, are an annual occurrence in South Asia. In 2017, 1,300 people were killed and 45 million people impacted by floods in South Asia. According to UNICEF, 16 million children were among the victims.

Though the monsoons are a natural phenomenon, responsibility for the social devastation lies with the regional ruling classes and their governments. Climate change, driven by global warming, deforestation and unplanned mining, worsens the situation.

Enriching themselves at the expense of the masses, no section of South Asia's capitalist elites has taken any serious flood mitigation measures, let alone provided safe dwellings and adequate disaster relief. The International Disaster Database in Belgium noted in 2017 that around 2,000 people die every year in South Asian floods.

Two weeks ago, Xavier Castellanos, the Asia Pacific regional director of the International Federation of Red Cross and Crescent Societies, warned: "We are seeing growing numbers of displaced and increasing loss of life with each day of rain. Entire communities have been cut off by rising waters, increasing the risk of people going hungry and getting sick."

While that international charity has mobilised over 1,000 volunteers in Bangladesh, Nepal and India to provide emergency supplies, including food, temporary shelters and hygiene kits, these efforts are grossly inadequate.

On July 18, a *Hindustan Times* editorial called on the Indian government to develop "a long-term strategy on floods." Similar perfunctory calls have been issued after every major flood in the past ten years—in 2008, 2011, 2013, 2015 and 2017—but nothing has been done.

A "long-term strategy on floods" is impossible within the framework of the capitalist nation-state system. All the major rivers originate in the Himalayas, and pass through Nepal and India to Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The 1,800-kilometre border between India and Nepal has over 6,000 rivers and rivulets, which provide 70 percent of the river water during the dry season.

This year's monsoonal floods occur as wide areas of India face drought. The *Asia Times* recently reported that water levels in 85 of India's 91 reservoirs are below 40 percent and 65 are below 20 percent. Chennai, the Tamil Nadu state capital and the country's fourth-largest metro area, faces severe water shortages, with the working class and the poor hardest hit.

Monsoonal flood mitigation measures must be developed as part of a sub-continent plan that cuts across national boundaries and the conflicting profit interests and ambitions of the competing corporate elites. This perspective is rejected by all South Asian governments, underscoring the reactionary character of the 1947 division of the sub-continent into competing capitalist nation-states by British imperialism, India's Congress Party and the Hindu and Muslim elites.



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