Venice sees second worst flooding in recorded history

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Last week, massive flooding brought the city of Venice, Italy to its knees. On Tuesday, November 12, the high-water mark reached 187 centimeters (six feet), the second worst flooding in recorded history. On Friday, a new tidal surge brought another high tide of 154 centimeters (five feet). The "great flood" of 1966 holds the record at 190 centimeters (well over six feet).

As the first flood alarm sounded on Tuesday night, water rushed through the city, well above street level, flooding homes, shops, restaurants, hotels and monuments, and leaving tourists and locals to wade through the muck. Local authorities estimate that more than 85 percent of the city is under water. Dramatic video footage shows the extent of the damage.

On November 14, Italian Five Star Movement (M5S)-Democratic Party coalition Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte declared a state of emergency. The following day Venice Mayor Luigi Brugnaro (coalition center-right) closed Venice's St. Mark's Square and basilica. That wasn't enough to protect the historic church, as flood waters left the crypt under more than a meter of water. The historic Gritti Palace hotel was also flooded, furniture floating in the lobby as workers raced to bring it to higher floors. Gritti was just finished repairing damages from last year's storm.

Water taxis, the only efficient means of transportation between islands, were suspended and schools and city services remained closed for the entire week. Hotels say they are being forced to cancel reservations through December amid reports of more bad weather to come.

Not even Venice's Libreria Acqua Alta bookshop could withstand the deluge as shopkeepers and patrons rushed to save the beloved store that has been weathering storms for many years. At least two deaths have been reported. One, a man in his 70s, died from electrocution when he turned on the flood pump in his home. The Venice Fire Brigade deployed 150 firefighters to rescue people stranded on jetties, recover boats that broke free of their moorings, and to put extra water ambulances in the canals.

Mexican tourist Oscar Calzada, 19, told AFP on Friday, "It's shocking to see this, having water up to your knees."

The cost of this year's storm damage is already estimated to be hundreds of millions of euros, yet the government is only promising residents a miserly €5,000 for flood-damaged homes and €20,000 for flood-damaged businesses. Many are still recovering from record tides last year, and this sum is hardly enough to make anyone whole again.

Known as La Serenissima, the most serene, Venice is an ecologically sensitive area made up of 118 small islands inside a lagoon off the north-east coast of Italy. Exceptional tide peaks, known as acqua alta, high water, occur periodically between autumn and spring, when the astronomical tides are reinforced by prevailing seasonal winds in the northern Adriatic Sea, reaching their maximum in the Venetian Lagoon.

Climate change has increased the severity and frequency of flooding as glacier ice melts and raises sea levels. Since 1923 over half of the exceptional high tides have occurred in the past 20 years alone. In 2018, there were 121 days of acqua alta, nearly twice the number of high tides in 2017.

Adding to the problem, Venice is sinking due to shifting tectonic plates and water pumped out of the ground for industrial use in the middle of the 20th century. Between 1950 and 1970, it sank almost five inches and continues to sink about one-fifth of an inch annually.

But capitalism is the real culprit. The long-awaited flood barrier system, MOSE (Modulo Sperimentale

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Elettromeccanico), approved in concept in 1988 and under construction since 2003, is still not complete despite costing nearly €6 billion. It is projected to open in 2021 or 2022, with estimated annual operating costs of €110 million per year, a tidy sum as Italy's GDP continues to shrink following the 2008 global financial crisis.

In 2014, 35 people, including then Venice Mayor Giorgio Orsoni, a member of the Democratic Party, and Giancarlo Galan, a member of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza party, were arrested following a three-year state-run criminal investigation into corruption, illicit party financing and tax fraud, totaling €5.3 billion.

Orsoni was convicted and sentenced to jail for accepting €500,000 in illicit funding from the Consorzio Venezia Nuova, the entity overseeing the MOSE project. However, through a plea deal, he never saw a day in jail and returned to his post as professor of law at Ca' Foscari University. Galan received a prison sentence of two years and 10 months and a fine of €2.6 million for bribery, extortion and money laundering. He served his "prison" term in the comfort of his own home near Padua.

This past July, it was discovered that all 156 hinges—each weighing 36 tons—on the underwater barriers that were supposed to last at least 100 years are nearly rusted shut after just 10 years under water. The €200 million tender for the hinges was awarded to Gruppo Mantovani without a formal bid, and the company is under investigation for using sub-par steel. Replacing the hinges is estimated to take 10 years and cost €30 million.

Last week, Venice resident Dino Perzolla, 62, reflected the outrage felt by Venetians about MOSE, telling AFT news, "They've done nothing, neglected it. It doesn't work and they have stolen six billion euros. The politicians should all be put in jail."

Ironically, as the Veneto regional council was debating the 2020 regional budget, including measures to address climate change, the chamber room flooded.

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