Swathes of UK underwater as record storms expose government indifference

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29 February 2020

Multiple storms in the UK have caused catastrophic floods and a number of deaths.

Storm Ciara hit on the weekend of February 8 and 9, bringing winds of more than 90mph. The following weekend Storm Dennis hit with winds recorded at over 70mph. Another storm, Jorge, will hit the UK today—the fifth since December.

During Storm Ciara, more than a month's worth of rainfall fell in just 24 hours, taking three lives. At least six people were killed by Storm Dennis, with 50,000 residents left without power. Storm Ciara flooded over 1,340 properties, and by this week Storm Dennis over 1,400. Many businesses were forced to abandon operations.

Eighteen river gauges across 15 rivers recorded their highest ever levels during the storms or in events triggered by them including the Colne, the Ribble, the Calder, the Aire, the Trent, the Severn, the Wye, the Lugg and the Derwent. Travel was disrupted for millions of people, with airlines cancelling hundreds of flights. Trains were delayed and cancelled with speed restrictions enforced throughout the network.

Storm Ciara deluged northwest England, North Wales, Cumbria and the Scottish Borders areas. Ciara caused mainly wind damage. Storm Dennis caused far more flood damage to homes, businesses and cars estimated at between £175 million and £225 million.

During just one day, February 17, a record 632 flood warnings and alerts were sent out in England, Wales and Scotland. A flood warning means that there is a direct threat to life posed. The warnings and alerts covered an area from Scotland's River Tweed to the rivers of west Cornwall in the extreme south of England. Main areas affected were South Wales, Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire in south west England. Hundreds of warning and alerts remain in place nationwide.

Emergency services deploying boats down flooded high streets to assist in evacuating residents has become a commonplace event. The level of flood water in many of the devastated areas are at the highest ever recorded, with many suffered repeat catastrophic incidences. What were described as once in a generation or once in a century events are becoming the new normal.

Particularly hard hit by Ciara was the Calder Valley in West Yorkshire. The narrow valley includes the towns of Todmorden, Hebden Bridge, Mytholmroyd and Sowerby Bridge.

The Calder Valley had been hard hit by flooding on Boxing Day in 2015, described as the worst flooding in living memory. More than 3,000 properties were inundated, and damage was estimated at £150 million. Those floods led to the construction of flood barriers along the length of the valley. However, Ciara completely overwhelmed the partially completed flood barriers in Mytholmroyd flooding out many who had suffered in 2015.

South Wales with its narrow steep valleys was especially impacted, with six severe flood warnings issued. The heavy downpours triggered landslides in the South Wales valley including one at a former coal mine tip. This sparked fears among locals of a repeat of the 1966 Aberfan disaster where a colliery tip slid down a hill side and suffocated 116 children in the local school.

Even before Storm Jorge arrives, further heavy rain this week led to more devastating flooding. On Thursday, the historic Shropshire town of Ironbridge was partly evacuated overnight as its temporary flood barriers started to buckle with water from the swollen River Severn seeping in. The town of Bewdley just 20 miles away was submerged by flooding from the river with the *Daily Mail* reporting, "Water crashed over barriers for the first time in decades and consumed an area near homes and businesses at the riverbank."

Thousands more residents living near the Severn face

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flooding, with a 100-mile stretch of the UK's longest river issued with flood warnings.

On Friday, rescue service instructed residents in East Cowick and Snaith, east Yorkshire, to leave their homes as water levels from the River Aire began to rise again. Some had left the previous evening with only the clothes they were wearing. An area 80 percent of the size of Lake Widermere (over 11 miles long) is now underwater.

While individual weather events, including storms, cannot be ascribed to manmade climate change, environmental scientist Angela Terry told the *Daily Mirror* , "As temperatures rise, the atmosphere can hold more water so downpours are more intense—7 percent more for every degree Celsius temperature increase—so flooding will increase. We are currently in a national emergency."

While the impact of climate crisis is worldwide, a recent study concluded the UK will be hit hardest within Europe. A *Daily Telegraph* article February 12 noted, "The Global Futures study by the World Wildlife Foundation and the Global Trade Analysis Project estimates the decline of natural assets will mean the UK suffers some of the biggest financial losses if nature is not preserved from the destruction it currently faces. The country will be third behind only the United States and Japan, taking an annual hit to its economy of at least £16 billion by 2050… The main economic costs will be caused by the loss of natural coastal protection services leading to flooding and erosion, as well as declining fish stocks."

Under conditions in which large swathes of the country are underwater and people's lives ruined, the Conservative government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson responded with barely disguised contempt. Johnson refused to visit any flooded area and never convened a national emergency meeting of government departments to discuss the crisis. Last November, during the general election campaign, Johnson chaired a Cobra emergency committee meeting in Downing Street, pledging to "take personal charge" of the situation and visited a few flood-stricken areas for photo-ops. The number of flood warnings and locations deluged was far less than in the current crisis.

Instead of a co-ordinated response and the necessary resources allocated, a series of ad-hoc token operations took place—mainly involving the creation via sandbags of a few miles of temporary flood barriers. The government claimed this was being organised from the cabinet office by a hitherto unknown body—the National Flood Response Centre. Yet it took 10 days after Ciara first hit for the government to allow affected people to apply for a "financial hardship payments" of up to just £500 in council tax and business rates relief. Other could apply to access funds of no more than £2,500 to cover some uninsurable losses.

The only other money made available is under the Bellwin scheme, which reimburses local authorities for some of the spending they incur in dealing with emergencies.

The government repeats that it is spending £4 billion on flood defences over the next four years—a pittance—but has yet to announce where and when the money will be allocated. Many of the areas flooded over the last decade were promised funding for defence schemes by previous governments that has not been allocated.

Under conditions in which now regular floods ruthlessly expose the total inadequacy of the UK's crumbling infrastructure, including antiquated flood defences that date back to the early 19th century—the government is washing its hands of responsibility. Yesterday, the Environment Agency was reduced to putting out congratulatory tweets ahead of Storm Jorge that it has finally managed to repair *temporary* flood defences destroyed in the previous storms.

The Environment Agency is expected to announce a new flood "strategy" in the spring. The *Daily Telegraph* reported this would mean "accepting some areas will flood" and that there should be a shift in policy "from protection to resilience…"

With more than five million people in England alone already at risk from flooding and coastal erosion, 11,410 new homes are planned in areas at high risk of flooding—including areas where thousands of homes have already suffered flood damage.

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