

East Africa: Millions face triple disasters of floods, locusts and COVID-19

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Millions face a terrible struggle to survive following the worst floods in East Africa for 40 years.

The torrential rains are also providing the ideal conditions for breeding a new generation of locust swarms as early as next month, threatening the region's food supply, and exacerbating the difficulties in combatting the spread of the coronavirus.

Mudslides and the bursting of riverbanks releasing thousands of litres of water have swept away homes, washed away bridges and roads and strained critical infrastructure, forcing many to take refuge in makeshift camps or schools. This increases the risk of COVID-19 spreading. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has warned of a further increase in rainfall.

The floods have killed some 300 people—a number that could rise as water-borne diseases, such as cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery and typhoid take their toll. At least 1.3 million people have been affected and nearly 500,000 displaced, mostly in Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda and Rwanda, but also in Djibouti, Burundi and Tanzania. Even before the floods, East Africa had 10.8 million forcibly displaced people and 22.5 million severely food insecure people.

The recent heavy rains come on the back of an above-average “short rains” season at the end of last year, driven by the strongest positive Indian Ocean Dipole since 2016, which affected at least 3.4 million people across Eastern Africa and caused water bodies across the region to swell.

With water levels rising in multiple locations across the region, rivers have burst their banks and lakes have overflowed.

Some 40 million people living in major cities, including Kampala and Entebbe in Uganda and Kisumu in Kenya, are at a heightened risk of flooding and

infrastructure damage as Lake Victoria received nearly double its usual rainfall to reach a record high of 13.42 metres, the highest in 120 years. The floods have already damaged Uganda's power plant on Lake Victoria and could lead to a loss of more homes. As the great lake is also the source of the White Nile that flows through South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt, the increase in water levels could lead to flooding in these countries.

The floods bring the threat of another locust swarm that would strip the region's food supplies—a swarm can consume 200 tonnes of vegetation in one day—under conditions where the rains have already affected crops and food prices, leaving up to 20 million people at risk of famine. Local markets, where subsistence farmers sold their produce, have been closed due to a breakdown of supply chains or as a precaution against the spread of the virus.

The World Bank estimates that this second swarm of locusts will cause around \$8.5 billion worth of economic damage across East Africa, far more than the first wave—the largest in 70 years—that affected Somalia, Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia in February, as the swarm multiplies and extends its reach during the harvest season.

All the countries affected by the floods and locusts are victims of more than a century of imperialist oppression and exploitation that continues to this day. They continue to suffer from US-led military interventions, economic sanctions or political intrigues that have had devastating social consequences. Such machinations in turn affect the limited grants and loans made available to the region. The World Bank is set to provide a paltry \$160 million to Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, key US clients in the region, to offset this. War-torn Somalia gets nothing.

The twin disasters of floods and locusts, causing displacement and hunger, come as the coronavirus continues to spread in East Africa. Compiled before the onset of the pandemic, the United Nation's World Food Programme report for 2020 warned that 73 million people in Africa, beset not only with poverty, but also with conflicts and the impact of natural disasters, economic crises and climate change, are at risk of a food crisis or worse by the end of the year. This, along with widespread poverty and ramshackle public health systems, makes the region especially vulnerable to pandemics like COVID-19. Without urgent action and funding, tens of millions of people face starvation and millions could die due to the pandemic.

Within the six countries of the East African Community (EAC) and Ethiopia, the areas most affected by the floods and locusts, there are nearly 4,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and close to 100 deaths, likely a vast underestimate. The absence of health care infrastructure means that huge numbers of cases are going undetected, and many are dying due to a lack of basic medical care.

The region's governments moved swiftly to impose lockdowns and curfews in a bid to break the chain of transmission. Security forces used brutal means to force people off the streets, using tear gas on ferry commuters in Kenya and killing two people in Rwanda.

The floods have made any pretence of social distancing, always difficult in Kenya and Uganda's teeming slums and refugee and displaced peoples' camps, an impossibility. Speaking about the region's floods, Julius Mucunguzi, spokesman for Uganda's Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda, told Reuters, "What complicates the matter is that this is the era of COVID. People are expected to maintain social distance, but how do you maintain distance in such a situation?"

The lockdowns have had devastating economic consequences. Much of the region's economy has collapsed, threatening millions with destitution. Kenya and Uganda's flower export market has broken down. Tourism, which plays a key role in the region, has ground to a halt, affecting accommodation providers and guides as well as the informal traders who sell food and goods to visitors.

Most people work in the informal sector, leaving

them without any social safety net. A recent report by the UN's International Labour Organisation estimated that informal workers had lost 60 percent of their earnings. For most of them, stopping work or working from home is not an option. "To die from hunger or from the virus" has become the all-too-real dilemma.

It affects not just the street markets and vendors, but small craftsmen in the clothing, leather or carpentry sectors, transport workers and car mechanics, personal service workers and agriculture—which represent more than two-thirds of informal workers in sub-Saharan Africa—with millions of small peasants from rural or peri-urban areas producing for the urban market being unable to sell their produce.

For those whose lives already hang by a thread, the economic impact of the pandemic will push them over the edge. Already there have been reports of food hoarding and price gouging in several sub-Saharan African countries, making food both scarce and unaffordable for those most in need. None of the region's governments have made any attempt to aid the millions of impoverished workers who have lost their jobs and incomes as the result of government anti-COVID-19 lockdowns.

The same governments that callously abandoned them are cynically exploiting the masses' financial destitution and social distress to justify forcing them to return to work under unsafe conditions that will accelerate the spread of the virus. The World Health Organisation (WHO) warned that Africa still faces a growing threat from the COVID-19 pandemic, saying that it could face a "silent epidemic" if its leaders do not prioritise testing of coronavirus. Special envoy Samba Sow said, "My first point for Africa, my first concern, is that a lack of testing is leading to a silent epidemic in Africa."

The social misery confronting the population underscores the incapacity of all factions of Africa's reactionary and corrupt bourgeoisie to overcome the legacy of colonialism and imperialist oppression.



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