

Vietnam suffers through a “new normal” of extreme weather events

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Vietnam is being pummeled by ongoing tropical storms causing major flooding and landslides in its central regions. As of Monday morning, the death toll had reached 130 with 18 people missing, according to government figures. This was up from 119 fatalities on Saturday, with most occurring in the central provinces of Quang Tri, Thua Thien Hue and Quang Nam.

Close to a million people have been severely affected, with many in desperate need of shelter, food, clean drinking water and income support. According to the UN, as of last Thursday, at least 178,000 homes were currently under water.

Flood levels eclipsed the 1979 record by 0.98 metres, hovering at 4.89 metres for several consecutive days in the province of Quang Binh. The amount of rain that fell between October 6 and 13 was two to six times higher than normal in some regions.

Most of the hardest hit have been poor farmers. Agricultural damage has been extensive, with 1,500 hectares of rice fields and 7,800 hectares of other crops being either flooded or damaged. Close to a million head of cattle and poultry have also been killed or swept away.

The government has stated that the damage caused has been “the worst in five years”. Several highways and local roads are blocked with rocks the size of cars, hampering rescue efforts.

About a third of deaths have been of military personnel.

In one instance, a team of 21 rescuers, most of them military officers, was sent to verify reports of 17 workers buried by a landslide at the Rao Trang 3 hydroelectric plant deep in the jungle. The workers were reportedly asleep when they were buried on October 12.

The rescue team stopped at a ranger station for the

night and were buried in a rocky landslide. Of the 13 deaths, 11 were from the military. Only four of the 17 workers at the dam have been recovered thus far and authorities have deployed more rescue forces to the scene.

Days later, a barracks in Quang Tri was consumed by a mudslide in the early hours of the morning, killing 20 military personnel, likely the largest number of military casualties suffered in a period of peace, according to officials.

Scientists believe flooding in central Vietnam is the result of a “new normal” of weather patterns driven by complex processes.

On an international scale, the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) reported recently a 75 percent increase in natural disasters in the last 20 years. Between 1980 and 1999, there were 4,212 major natural disasters. Between 2000 and 2019, 7,348 major disaster events were recorded costing 1.23 million lives, affecting 4.2 billion people and costing the global economy USD\$2.97 trillion.

The increase is largely attributed to climate related events such as floods, droughts and storms.

Speaking at a virtual conference, UNDRR chief Mami Mizutori accused governments of abandoning effective measures to deal with climate change, “It is baffling that we willingly and knowingly continue to sow the seeds of our own destruction,” he said, “despite the science and evidence that we are turning our only home into an uninhabitable hell for millions of people.”

In the Asia Pacific, the cyclical la Nina phenomenon is intensifying storms in the region, and is expected to continue until early next year. Cambodia has reported 39 deaths from flooding, with hundreds of thousands affected and 46,216 people evacuated to safer ground.

Vietnam has been hit by three tropical storms and a depression in the month of October. Typhoon Mojave, at present travelling westwards over the Philippines, is also likely to impact in the weeks ahead. It is currently bringing heavy rain and strong winds of 130 kilometres per hour. About 9,000 people in the Philippines have fled their homes.

Professor of human ecology at Rutgers University, Pamela McElwee, told the *New York Times* that the sheer volume of rainfall in Vietnam was, “so extraordinarily out of the normal” that it shattered the government’s midrange predictions of how climate change might increase precipitation in its central regions by the end of the century.

She also stated that the construction of hydroelectric dams and poor mountain roads had weakened the soil. “The earth is just soaked with water and has nowhere to go.”

Christopher Rassi, Director of the International Federation of Red Cross, warned of the economic fallout: “We are seeing a deadly double disaster unfold before our eyes as these floods compound the difficulties caused by COVID-19. These floods are the last straw and will push millions of people further towards the brink of poverty.”

The Vietnamese economy relies heavily on its tourism industry which has been drastically cut back during the pandemic. Borders were virtually closed in late March. Apart from an outbreak in Da Nang Hospital in late July, total cases have been kept low and contained at under 1,500, with 40 deaths.

The Asian Development Bank assessed in September that Vietnam’s economy would grow at around 1.8 percent in 2020, its slowest rate in 35 years and significantly lower than pre-pandemic levels.

The Stalinist regime in Vietnam has ruthlessly pursued a policy of capitalist restoration for decades. According to its own estimates, economic inequality is worsening. Between 2014 and 2018 the GINI index of Vietnam, a standard measure of income inequality, was 0.4 [where 0 represents absolute equality and 1 absolute inequality]. The figure is regarded as a tipping point with higher numbers frequently associated with social unrest and political instability.

Out of fear of social unrest, the regime has sought to suppress criticism from workers and the peasantry. According to the UN, hundreds of people have been

interrogated so far over COVID-19 related Facebook posts. In the lead up to the congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in January 2021, the government has begun a campaign of censoring dissident and left-wing publications.



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