

Flood of the century in Western Europe: Over 100 dead, thousands missing

Elisabeth Zimmermann, Marianne Arens
16 July 2021

The flood disaster in western Germany, Belgium and part of the Netherlands is taking on increasingly dramatic proportions. By midday Friday, the death toll in the German regions of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia had risen to 106, with more being added every hour. Thousands of people are still considered missing.

The provisional death toll in Belgium has risen to 23, with another 20 missing, according to an account released by the government at midday Friday.

And in the southern Dutch city of Maastricht, 10,000 people had also been evacuated after fears that the Meuse River would overflow its banks so much that residential areas would be flooded. Due to the power outage associated with the flooding, many cell phones are inoperable as there is nowhere to charge batteries. Entire communities are cut off because roads, bridges and railroad tracks are impassable. The floodwaters have washed them under or over and destroyed them.

Communities along the Ahr, a western tributary of the Rhine, south of Bonn, located partly in Rhineland-Palatinate and partly in North Rhine-Westphalia, are devastated. The village of Schuld in the district of Ahrweiler, which lies on several bends of the Ahr, was largely destroyed. In many other places along the Ahr, houses are flooded, partially or completely destroyed or in danger of collapse. People have neither clean drinking water nor electricity.

A particularly tragic case occurred in Sinzig, where the Ahr flows into the Rhine. Here, due to the floods, 12 people died in a home for the disabled. They lived in a house run by the Ahrweiler district association. Due to the rapid rise of the Ahr overnight from Wednesday to Thursday, the first floor of the residential home was flooded. The severely disabled people were not evacuated in time and could not save themselves.

In Rhineland-Palatinate, the number of known fatalities had risen to 63 by Friday afternoon, with at least 362 people reported injured in the Ahrweiler district alone. It is feared that these numbers will continue to rise. Not only is there a lack of electricity and drinking water in Ahrweiler, but a gas pipeline has also been destroyed. The gas supplier said this could take several months to repair.

In the neighbouring state of North Rhine-Westphalia, 43 deaths have been officially reported. Here, too, it is feared that the number will rise sharply.

The situation is particularly critical in Erftstadt-Blessem, near Cologne. Here, at least three residential buildings and part of the town's historic castle have collapsed. Rescue workers are trying to pull people out of these houses, but so far have had difficulty reaching them. "We assume several dead, but we don't know," said North Rhine-Westphalia Interior Minister Herbert Reul (CDU).

The Erft, also normally a small river, rose enormously due to the rains, turning into a raging torrent. The dam at one of the lakes broke, unleashing a flood wave. Large areas of land are also flooded, and the harvest in the farmers' fields has been destroyed. Volunteers are caring for those who managed to escape their homes in emergency shelters, though this raises the risk of COVID-19 infections.

Another crisis point is the district of Euskirchen. There is still a danger that the dam of the nearby Steinbach reservoir will burst, so that the nearby villages could be flooded. Some of the residents were already evacuated on Thursday. The situation is also critical at other dams.

The districts of Aachen and Düren were also hit by heavy storms and heavy rain. In North Rhine-Westphalia, 23 municipalities are affected by heavy

flooding. Cologne, Trier, Solingen, Hagen, Leverkusen, Aachen are also affected, though the extent of the damage is still unknown.

In many regions, people have described the levels of damage as the worst since World War II. In Schuld, population 700, the mayor described the impact as “Like after a bombing raid.”

The floods followed several weeks of intense, persistent rainfall. In the narrow valleys of the Eifel, the region around Cologne, the Bergisches Land and the Sauerland, small streams became raging torrents within hours.

The causes are to be found both in climate change and in a lack of safety infrastructure. Scientists have long warned of the effects of climate change, which is causing unprecedented heat and drought in Canada and the western United States. However, periods of heavy rainfall in Europe have been attributed to the warmer atmosphere, which now can absorb significantly more moisture than before. Changes in the jet stream, also caused by climate change, are another contributing factor.

The Belgian Royal Meteorological Institute reported a record rainfall over 48 hours in Liège, near the German border, with more than 271 mm recorded at Jalhay and 217 mm at Spa. David Denehauw, the head of meteorological forecasts, said on Twitter that these levels are seen “statistically once in 200 years. Normally we measure 100mm in July in these areas.”

Flood disasters have been increasing for several years, and researchers, geographers and urban planners are well aware of this problem. It would be entirely possible to prevent such natural events from turning into deadly catastrophes by taking the necessary preventive measures.

There are examples of this. For example, in the Saxon city of Grimma on the Mulde River, a flood protection system was installed three years ago after major flood disasters of 2002 and 2013. It consists of numerous flood gates and a protective wall several kilometres long, reaching 12 metres deep into the earth. A complex canal system under the city can absorb and drain large amounts of water. Within two hours, the city centre can be sealed off tightly.

But such installations are extremely rare. After the previous floods of the century, government politicians have concentrated—if at all—on the major rivers. But

even in the smaller valleys, many mayors have been aware of the dangers for years and are quite prepared to take preventive measures. However, the municipalities simply do not have the money to do so.

In Germany and across Europe, governments have spent trillions of euros on bailouts for corporations, banks and shareholders during the coronavirus pandemic. Massive war preparations, overseas troop deployments and modern weapons systems are being financed. The German Bundeswehr is being upgraded, and the government is making investments in cyberspace and space warfare. However, there is no money for the elementary security of the population.

The causes of this latest flood disaster are to be found in the capitalist system. The capitalist class has been incapable and unwilling to take any action over more than 30 years to prevent climate change or significantly improve critical infrastructure, because to do so would impact upon the profit and geostrategic interests of the capitalist elite.

It has demonstrated its indifference toward human life throughout the coronavirus pandemic, as it deliberately allowed the virus to spread in order to prevent any impact of social-distancing measures on corporate profits. With the same indifference it has rejected necessary expenditures in social infrastructure to protect the population from social disaster. It views such expenditure as an intolerable inroad into its own wealth.

The answer of the working class to this policy of social murder must be the conscious struggle for socialism. Trillions of dollars must be invested into social infrastructure projects for the protection of the population on an international scale, and toward a transition toward renewable energy. Such a policy requires the taking of political power by the working class and the organisation of social life on the basis of social need, not private profit.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact