

Chinese city hit by “once in a millennium” torrential rains

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At least 25 people are dead after torrential rain and flooding hit the central Chinese city of Zhengzhou, in what the local meteorological bureau described as a “once in a millennium” event. A dozen people were killed after being trapped by flood waters in the city’s subway, with five more injured. Hundreds were trapped in the train and had to be rescued.

The flooding brought much of the city, with its population of over 12 million, to a halt on Tuesday. More than 80 bus lines and the subway service were temporarily suspended while the city’s airport cancelled 260 flights. Some neighbourhoods were without water and electricity and about 200,000 people had to be evacuated.

Zhengzhou is an important industrial city. It is home to three huge factories owned by the Taiwan-based electronics-assembly giant, Foxconn Technology Group, which employs hundreds of thousands of people. More than half of Apple’s iPhones are manufactured in the city. Power was temporarily cut to one of the Foxconn sites.

Zhengzhou is the capital of Henan province, which has more than 100 million people. The province has been battered by storms over the past few days. The banks of major rivers burst in several locations, flooding several cities and leading to the closure of highways into the province. At a press conference yesterday, local authorities said that more than 1.2 million people had been affected and 20,000 hectares of crops damaged.

According to the official Xinhua news agency, at least four people were killed in Gongyi city near Zhengzhou, when houses and walls collapsed. The heavy rain has also caused a number of landslides. In the city of Dengfeng, there was a major explosion at an aluminum alloy factory after the floodwaters caused a factory wall to collapse and water to mix with chemicals kept inside.

The Zhengzhou meteorological bureau said the downpours were the heaviest in the city on an hourly and daily basis since records began in 1951. It received

671.1mm of rain—more than its average annual rainfall 604.8mm—in just over three days from Saturday evening to Tuesday. On Tuesday afternoon, 201.9mm fell in one hour.

According to China’s National Meteorological Center, the heavy rainfalls in Henan were the result of water vapour being pushed by Typhoon In-Fa and hitting a mountainous area.

The rainfall was greater than in 1975 when Henan experienced one of the world’s deadliest floods caused by a typhoon. More than 60 dams, including the large Banqiao dam, devastated large areas of the province with estimates of the death toll ranging between 26,000 and 240,000. More than 10 million people were affected, and 30 cities and counties inundated.

Chinese authorities clearly concerned about breached riverbanks, the failure of dams and a far greater catastrophe ordered thousands of troops into Henan. The People’s Liberation Army announced on Wednesday morning that it had averted the collapse of the Yihetan dam near Zhengzhou. Blasting operations had “successfully opened a new flood diversion opening” and lowered water levels.

President Xi Jinping declared that some dams had already burst, “causing serious injury, loss of life and property damage.” He pompously ordered “leaders and [party] cadres from all walks of life... to take the lead in commanding, quickly organise forces for flood protection and disaster rescue.”

Xi was responding to growing public outrage. According to the *Financial Times*, shock and anger have already been expressed towards weather forecasters, for failing to adequately warn of the dangers, and the state media that downplayed the seriousness of the floods. One widely shared article noted that local state media had initially said people trapped in subway cars were not at risk.

“Even if it was a once in a millennium downpour that caused the Zhengzhou floods, it may not be a natural disaster,” the article said. “If the dam discharge... caused the flood, then that’s definitely a human-made disaster.”

Zhengzhou, which lies on the southern bank of the Yellow River, has long been prone to flooding. In 2016, it was chosen to become one of 14 pilot cities involved in the country’s “sponge city” construction program, aimed at retaining and recycling rainfall. By 2020, the city had spent 53.5 billion yuan (\$8.3 billion) on projects such as reinforcing the riverbanks and building water-permeable roads. The current disaster now raises questions about the efficacy of these expensive projects.

While China experiences annual storms and heavy rain at this time of year the threat of flooding is growing worse. The authorities have built tens of thousands of dams in part to mitigate flooding, but many are poorly maintained and prone to collapse in heavy rains. The dangers are compounded by excessive construction on low-lying areas and land reclamation of wetlands and lakes that have traditionally been a buffer against floodwaters.

Other areas of China have also been hard hit, with heavy downpours in Beijing last week resulting in the evacuation of 15,000 people from their homes. On Sunday, two dams collapsed in Inner Mongolia, following torrential rains. Earlier in the month, the city of Bazhong in Sichuan province suffered three days of heavy rain that affected over 380,000 people.

Following the devastating floods in Europe, the disaster in Zhengzhou adds to concerns about the impact of climate change. Climate scientists are warning that climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of extreme weather events such as heatwaves and floods.



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