Flood victims in Ahrweiler: “We are the Baghdad of Germany. Totally bombed, totally destroyed”

Our reporters
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The flood disaster in the German federal states of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia, as well as neighbouring Belgium and the Netherlands, has claimed the lives of more than 200 people and destroyed the livelihoods of tens of thousands. Last week, a team of reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* toured the disaster area to talk to those affected and to get a picture of the devastation.

The district of Ahrweiler, in the north of Rhineland-Palatinate, is one of the worst-hit areas. At least 128 people died there alone and an estimated 150 are still missing. Houses, bridges and roads have been destroyed in some places. Even after more than a week, many villages are still without hot water and electricity. The mobile phone network is also still not working in some places.

While many volunteers are helping to clear houses and roads from the mud and debris, government assistance is vanishingly small. It is now known that the high death toll is a direct result of the criminal inaction of governments and responsible authorities. Although they were informed early on, they did nothing to warn people and save lives.

Many residents gave vent to their anger, talking about the dramatic events and at the same time reporting on the enormous solidarity they are experiencing from the population.

Wolfgang described how he and his wife were taken completely by surprise by the approaching floods. “When we saw the water approaching here, I took the dog in my arms and wanted to quickly go to the pub across the street. When I stepped in front of the door, the water was already up to my knees and a wave almost swept me away. Then I immediately went back into the house with my wife, and we tried to push the door shut. We had no idea at all. Big tree trunks broke all the windows, and the water came rushing in here, between 1.5 and two metres high. We had to escape to the first floor.”

“We had no warning at all,” says Bettina, who has run a guest house in Walporzheim for decades. When the sirens sounded, the neighbouring village had long been under water, she reports. She and her neighbours and family immediately went to the town on their own to get sandbags. “But there was no sand left. They told us to get the sand from the sandbox at the playground, but it was already flooded.” Afterwards, Bettina says, they were given empty bags to fill themselves while they were already waist-deep in water.

“We did a makeshift job of securing the door with the sacks, put tables in front of the doors and bailed out the water running in as best we could. A guest tried to hold on to his car in the water outside so it wouldn’t float away. From 1 a.m. onwards, we stood at the window and watched to see if the water would continue to rise. Meanwhile, the internet has gone, electricity and water are also gone.”

Looking ahead to rebuilding her home and the whole region, Bettina says, “I don’t think this damage will be paid for by the government. I also don’t know where the promised ‘emergency aid’ is. You are supposed to write an email, but the networks are blocked. If you don’t have someone from outside to do it, you are completely lost. There are no people on the ground from the state, from any authorities, to help you with this.”

“This could have been predicted—with all the rainfall in Belgium, in Holland, here, all over Germany,” Bettina notes. “With such heavy rainfall, they could have calculated it and ordered an evacuation. But that didn’t happen because the government wants to save money: an evacuation costs money, you have to house and feed the people. They were afraid of the costs and didn’t want to look stupid if nothing happened afterwards.

“Instead, nothing was done, no warning went through at all. No THW [disaster relief agency], no soldiers—nothing came here at all. The first few days after the flood, there were only volunteers here. Farmers organised themselves via Facebook and cleared everything away here with huge

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excavators and trucks. The police—heavily armed—stood on the bridge and watched the water coming and what it was doing. That's all they did; they neither emptied a cellar nor cleared anything away."

Apparently, Bettina said, "the money was invested elsewhere, for example, to build up the military. But nothing seems to have been invested in disaster management because it doesn't work at all."

The WSWS reporting team also spoke to many volunteers who have come from all over the country to help.

"I came here because I was moved by the whole thing," says Steffi, who travelled from Thuringia. "That's why I packed up the car straight away and will stay until Sunday to help." Aline from Schwäbisch Hall added, "I organised myself with a group from the Stuttgart area and drove here overnight. I was moved by the images on TV. Everyone here is doing their best."

"Four metres of mud swept through the village, taking everything with it," Rosa reported. "I have never seen anything like it. Even today there are 40 centimetres of mud in the cellars and 20 centimetres of water above. The people here can't do it alone. It would take 10 helpers for each house."

Sven travelled from Bergisches Land together with his son Paul to help. "I can only call on everyone to do the same," he says. "Help is still needed here everywhere. It's exhausting and hard, but the people here need it very badly."

"You can see here that we are all standing together and helping each other," said Kai. "That's very important, even in this day and age, where selfishness is praised very highly. We are demonstrating solidarity, and in that respect it's great what's going on here."

Alwin, who has run a restaurant for 45 years, said, "In our neighbourhood alone, 11 people have died. One man was hanging in a tree for four hours calling for help. But no one could help him because the cars were already flooding past him. Everything was under water and our livelihood is now destroyed, of course."

When asked if he was satisfied with the measures taken by the authorities, Alwin replied, "No, definitely not. Far too little came from our district administrator and our mayor. If such a flood is expected, then we still have two hours here. Then you can tell everyone to leave their house, take their car to safety and take their valuables with them. The water cannot be stopped, but the 125 dead we already have—that didn't have to happen. That's already 125 too many."

Alwin also confirmed that the catastrophe hit the residents completely unexpectedly, although the authorities had long since been warned of it at the time. "No, there was no warning at all for residents. We looked up the water levels ourselves on the internet and said, this is damn high now, we have to do something. When the fire brigade tried to get us to leave the house hours later, we decided against it. Instead, we went to the first floor and a short time later the water was 1.95 metres high in the house. If we had gone out, we might have drowned too, as many others did." The water had risen so fast that many would not have made it to a hill in time.

Alwin added, "As far as the district administration is concerned, I am not satisfied. But the fact we had many volunteers who helped clean up right at the beginning—that was enormous." It was all the more incomprehensible, he said, "that farmers were then told to go home again and that the Bundeswehr [Armed Forces] and the THW would now do it on their own. And nothing came from the district administration, no one was seen there."

Alwin attributed the fact that so many people died to the "total failure" of the state authorities, adding, "There are enough 3D models showing that no one would die [if you climb a mountain in time]. But if no one knows and says, 'we're going to see how high the water rises,' that's negligent, grossly negligent. I assume that the insurance companies can't cover everything. A lot of money is being donated, but the damage must amount to €50 billion. Where is all the money going to come from?"

Referring to the €200 million in "emergency aid" promised by the federal government, Alwin asked, "How many people are affected? Surely, every household has 100,000, 200,000, 500,000 [euros] down the drain. How is that supposed to be distributed and who distributes it? You can't flatten the region here now. If every second house remains empty or is no longer rebuilt, then this will be a ghost town. One of them said to me: We are the Baghdad of Germany. Totally bombed, totally destroyed. And how many dead we have here! That has never happened in Germany before.

"Of course it could have been avoided! In my opinion, the fire brigade and the police should have gone around immediately and warned all the people. They could have driven through here from five o'clock. Then we wouldn't have any dead people here."

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