

Over 100 dead in landslides, flooding in the Indian state of Maharashtra

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Adding more victims to the millions who have died from COVID-19, devastating landslides and flooding triggered by torrential rains over the last three days have killed more than 100 people in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. Maharashtra, where India's financial capital Mumbai is located, is also the state worst hit by COVID-19 in the country.

According to media reports, the toll from rain-related incidents in the state has risen to 112 as of July 25, while 99 people remain missing. Among the deceased are 38 people killed by multiple landslides in Raigad district's Talai village on Thursday. *India Today* reported that officials fear 30 to 35 more victims are trapped under the debris.

Parts of India's west coast have received up to 594 mm (23 inches) of rain, while the hill station of Mahabaleshwar recorded its highest ever rainfall: 60cm in 24 hours. As many as 54 villages were severely damaged by floods with 821 villages partially hit. Nearly 100,000 people were shifted from flood-affected areas to safer places in Western Maharashtra's Pune division on Friday, as rains battered the region. Major rivers are reportedly at risk of bursting their banks.

Media reported that rescuers are struggling to reach affected residents, as landslides have blocked roads, including the main highway from Mumbai to Goa. As a result, thousands of trucks were stuck for more than 24 hours on a highway linking Mumbai to the southern technology hub of Bengaluru, Reuters reported.

According to an NDTV article, "in Ratnagiri's Chiplun town, another of those completely flooded, rescuers raced to save people from a COVID-19 hospital cut off from aid. Other visuals from the town showed a terrifying image—a few people on the roof of a building pulling up a woman with rope."

People trapped in the mudslide-hit areas recounted

the horrific conditions there. Mujaffar Khan, a survivor from Mahad, told PTI, "there is a thick layer of mud ... it is not just soil, there are dead animals in it ... like rats."

Apart from 30 teams from national and state disaster response agencies, the Indian Air Force, Army, Navy, the Coast Guard and other services also were called for flood-relief operations.

Like always after this type of tragedy, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi rushed to his Twitter account to express his "condolences to bereaved families." Modi said he was "anguished by the loss of lives due to a landslide." In another tweet, Modi announced a payment of 200,000 rupees (\$US2,690) each to next of kin of those who lost their lives to landslides in Raigad and 50,000 rupees (\$670) each for the injured.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray also announced a payment of 500,000 rupees (\$6,700) each to next of kin of people who died in the landslide and promised the injured will be treated in hospitals "at state expense." Maharashtra is controlled by the Maha Vikas Aghadi coalition government with Thackeray's Shiv Sena and the Congress Party, along with the support from several other parties.

By providing these meagre compensations to people who lost their loved ones or their homes, Modi's central government and Thackeray's state government are trying to shamelessly cover up their own responsibilities for the current flood disaster.

Climate experts have raised fears about the impact of climate change, which has played a major part of this devastation. Flooding in India was reported days after heavy rain across Western Europe and across China, as well as heat waves across the US. While it is true that all these are natural disasters, the principal responsibility for the human cost must be placed on the

capitalist ruling elites. For decades it is those ruling elites that have failed to build infrastructure control to prepare for these disasters, failing to act upon warnings made by climate scientists.

They have also gone ahead with reckless construction projects based solely on profit motivations, with complete disregard for the impact these buildings have in facilitating floods.

In an article dealing with urban flooding, the DownToEarth website on October 11, 2019 noted: “Overburdened drainage, frenzied and unregulated construction, buildings constructed without paying any heed to the natural topography and hydro-geomorphology all add to the damage.” It highlighted that property developers have illegally built “on reclaimed wetlands, flood plains and low lands of the city as these areas have a cheaper land rate.”

The article gave a number of examples of how the government itself has been engaging in this reckless practice of building mega-projects right on the flood plains of various rivers.

The article particularly highlights the recurrent urban flooding in Mumbai, where the city’s old drainage system is “heavily silted and damaged.” Citing from a report tabled in the Maharashtra state assembly in early 2019, it notes: “The BRIMSTOWAD (Brihanmumbai Storm Water Disposal System) project, proposed in 1993, was intended to be a long-term road map for the city’s vulnerability to flooding; but no action was taken on it till the major flooding of 2005. The system has not been fully updated yet.”

This year alone, India has witnessed numerous natural disasters spanning from heat waves, cyclones, floods and wildfire. Some of the major incidents include:

The **Uttarakhand flood** was also known as the Chamoli disaster. On February 7, 2021, flooding in the Chamoli district ensued after an avalanche near Raini Village washed away the Rishiganga small hydro project and also hit the downstream hydroelectric power project at Tapovan on the river Dhauliganga. At least 72 workers were confirmed to have been killed. According to Wikipedia, the Indian government had disregarded warnings made by scientists for many years prior to the disaster that “the Himalayas had been warming at a dangerously high rate and the region’s ecosystem had become too physically exposed to the

dangers of development projects.”

Cyclone Tauktae was a powerful and deadly tropical cyclone in the Arabian Sea which traveled parallel to the coasts of the Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka, Goa and Maharashtra in May 2021. It brought heavy rainfall and flash floods to areas along the coast of Kerala and on Lakshadweep, an archipelago off the coast of Kerala. The storm displaced over 200,000 people in Gujarat. Overall, 169 people were confirmed dead and another 81 people missing. Losses from Cyclone Tauktae are estimated at \$2.1 billion.

Cyclone Yass was a strong and very damaging tropical cyclone that made landfall in Odisha and devastated West Bengal in late May. More than 4,500 villages were damaged, and various rural homes and agricultural lands were hard hit. In West Bengal, over 1,100 of the damaged villages were submerged in floods triggered by storm surges, displacing about 500,000 people. Overall, around 1 million people were affected in the state alone. The state government estimates total damages from the storm to be \$2.76 billion in West Bengal.

The Modi government and Indian ruling elite have repeatedly shown their complete indifference to the lives of millions of Indian toilers. Their reckless “herd immunity policy” has led to deaths of several million people by COVID-19 which has spread across the country, according to a recent study by US-based Center for Global Development. This government lavishly spends hundreds of billion of dollars on the military, while leaving hundreds of million of people to their fate.



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