

London floods highlight failure to address climate change and its consequences

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28 July 2021

Large areas of London were hit by flash floods this weekend. Although less severe than the recent devastating flooding in Europe and China, they caused serious disruption to health and transport systems and damage to homes.

Whipps Cross Hospital in the east of the city declared a major incident after it suffered a power outage due to the heavy rainfall. Ceiling panels in the maternity ward collapsed. Around 100 patients had to be evacuated, all scheduled operations cancelled, ambulances diverted and patients seeking urgent treatment asked to “attend alternative hospitals where possible.”

Several miles to the south, Newham Hospital was also forced to ask patients seeking urgent care to use other Accident and Emergency departments.

Nine London Underground and Overground stations were closed, with a video of Pudding Mill Lane station almost completely underwater going viral, as were many major roads.

The London Fire Brigade reported more than a thousand flooding-related calls, rescuing people from cars trapped in floodwater and helping with flooded basements and collapsed ceilings. Many homes have been severely damaged by the floodwater and overflowing sewage. Some households have been evacuated to emergency accommodation after power failures.

Flood warnings are in place for multiple areas of England, Wales and Scotland until Thursday.

The immediate cause of the weekend’s floods was the torrential rain which fell on the capital on Sunday. The average total rainfall for London in July is 45mm, but the St James’s Park station recorded 41.6mm of rain on Sunday alone, the station’s second-wettest July day since records began in 1912.

This is the second time in the last two weeks that a month’s rain has fallen in a day in London. On July 12, nearly three inches of rain fell in an hour and a half in

parts of the capital. On that occasion, the resulting flooding saw 120 residents in Kensington and Chelsea evacuated from their homes, another 1,000-plus calls to the London Fire Brigade and several underground stations closed. Euston Station, one of the capital’s main rail hubs, was shut down after lines out of London were completely submerged.

Such extreme weather events are happening more frequently due to climate change. A warmer atmosphere holds more moisture, amplifying heavy rains that impact most on urban areas with large hard surface areas. Professor Hayley Fowler, from the UK Climate Resilience Programme, told the BBC, “These heavy short-duration bursts from thunderstorms which cause flash flooding are becoming more common”. Her research suggests that flash floods “will increase five-fold by the 2080s” if climate change continues on its current trajectory.

Dr Jess Neumann, a hydrologist at the University of Reading, told the *Guardian*, “Flooding from intense summer rainfall is going happen more frequently. No city, town or village is immune to flooding and we all need to take hard action right now if we are to prevent impacts from getting worse in the future.”

Similar warnings have been issued for years without any serious action being taken. Just last month, the government’s climate change committee warned that the country was not ready for the impacts of climate change, saying “adaptation action has failed to keep pace with the worsening reality of climate risk.”

In February, Labour MP Meg Hillier, the chair of parliament’s public accounts committee, warned, “The government is simply not doing enough to protect the UK’s current housing stock from floods or stepping in to prevent new homes being built on flood plains”. The Environment Agency agreed: “We need long-term investment to both build and maintain flood defences if

we are to continue to protect and prepare the country from the increased risks that the climate emergency is bringing, with impacts already hitting worst case scenario levels.”

Major storms and floods in 2007, 2012, 2014, 2015- 16 and 2019- 2020, forcing tens of thousands of evacuations and causing billions of pounds worth of damage, have proven this point. An investigation by the research arm of Greenpeace, Unearthed, found that over 3,400 of England’s “high consequence” flood defences were rated as being in poor or very poor condition in 2019-20 by the Environment Agency.

Liz Stephens, associate professor of climate resilience at Reading University, commented after the weekend’s floods, “The surface water flood hazard maps for the UK have not been improved since 2013. These urgently need updating. The current accuracy of surface water flood maps reflects an investment choice and not what is possible with the state-of-the-art science.”

Large areas of the capital are at serious risk. According to the Greater London Authority, 17 percent of London is at medium or high risk of flooding and more than 1 million residents live on a floodplain.

The dangers are exacerbated by outdated infrastructure. Stephens told CNN, “The risk is always greater in the urban environment because we’ve got concreted surfaces, but we’re also relying on an old drainage infrastructure in London, we’re talking about Victorian drains.”

London’s underground network has long been identified as critically exposed. In 2016, the *Guardian* and the *Independent* reported on an unpublished Transport for London (TfL) flood risk report which identified 85 of its sites as being at “high risk” of flooding. Fifty-seven of those were London Underground stations, including some of the capital’s busiest—King’s Cross, London Bridge and Waterloo.

The report states, “London has been fortunate to escape the worst of recent storm events in the UK, but it is only a matter of time before heavy rainfall seriously affects London and the underground network.” It explained that the “increased laying of asphalt over earth surfaces” and climate change leading to “more intense” storms would be the biggest contributing factors.

London Underground requested £3 million over three years “to analyse the riskiest sites in greater detail and to begin to install protective measures”, but the service’s head drainage engineer told the *Guardian* that the money would not “scratch the surface” of the problem.

TfL’s “Annual Report and Statement of Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2021” identifies climate risk as

a “growing threat” and notes that “funding constraints” mean it is “likely to remain a challenge over the medium term.”

Successive governments refuse to adequately respond to the dangers posed by flooding because the money for such an initiative would have to be taken from big business and the super-rich. It would require laws managing urban development which would cut across the untrammelled profiteering of private property developers. Since 2013, one in 10 homes in England have been built on land with a high flood risk. Twenty-two Hyde Parks worth of gardens have been paved over in London to make way for parking or patios, reducing natural drainage.

Nowhere is the destructive logic of inequality and the capitalist market clearer than in North Kensington, hit hard by the floods two weeks ago. The area is filled with “iceberg houses”—homes owned by multimillionaires and billionaires who have extended their basements to multiple times the size of the house, accommodating swimming pools, cinemas, gyms and garages. Nearly 3,800 basement planning applications have been submitted to Kensington council in the last 10 years.

These gargantuan developments are likely to have contributed to the flooding. Mary Dhonau, a former CEO of the National Flood Forum, explained to the *Daily Mail*, “There has got to be somewhere for the water to go. When there is rain it falls onto the ground and percolates in areas of the ground. Super-basements are being built where the water would naturally percolate. There are other factors like climate change, but the more we take away permeable surfaces the more places will flood.

“North Kensington is a prime example of land that would have soaked up water, which is now being used for super basements.”

Whether the issue is the implementation of immediate extreme weather defences or the deeper problem of climate change, the primary obstacle confronting humanity is not natural or scientific, but social. The dangers can only be resolved through the expropriation of the vast fortunes and industrial empires controlled by the super-rich oligarchy and the democratic use of these resources to meet social needs.



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