

First-hand account of the devastating flooding in Zhengzhou, China

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The death toll from the “once in a millennium” torrential rainfall that flooded Zhengzhou, Henan Province’s largest city and capital in Central China, has risen to at least 99 people that include 18 in southwest in Xinmi city, and eight in Xingyang city, and 14 who died in the local subway system and six in the Jingguang Road Tunnel. Many remain missing.

The extreme flooding that occurred on July 20, 2021, dumped more than two feet of rain (25 inches, 644.6 mm) in three days across the metropolis of 12 million people, home to the world’s largest iPhone manufacturing base and a major center for industry. Specifically, Tuesday afternoon on July 20 between 4 and 5 p.m. local time, the rate of the downpour rose to a staggering 8 inches per hour (202 mm per hour). The amount of rain over the three days was more precipitation than the average rainfall for the region in an entire year. According to official figures at least 2.4 million people remain displaced.

According to *Climate Connections*, “This amount shattered China’s national record for highest one-hour rainfall of 6.63 inches (168.3 mm) for all 2,148 national weather stations in mainland China, previously set at Maoming, Guangdong.”

The meteorology of the event (see link above) notes that two typhoons, Cempka, making landfall southwest of Hong Kong, and In-fa, heading westward towards China’s coast, drew the monsoon moisture into an upper-level trough of low pressure that passed over Henan province, leading to heavy rainfall, in what is likely the largest downpour on a major city in human history.

According to *Climate Connections*, “The rainfall was likely increased as a result of air approaching Zhengzhou that travelled uphill into the foothills of the Tai-hang Mountains, causing extra cooling and condensation as the moist air rose upwards. A region of nearly stationary thunderstorms set up, leading to the astounding rainfall totals.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* had an opportunity to get a firsthand account of events that day with several people whose identity has been changed and names designated with initials to protect their identities. The following is their account.

On the question of the storms and flooding, Mr. Q, who lives in Luoyang, Henan, said, “It rained steadily for three days straight, starting on the evening of July 17 around 8 pm until 4 pm to 5 pm on July 20, the catastrophic hour, when an unprecedented rain fell; torrential rain, and local heavy rains in some areas in Henan Province, including Zhengzhou City, Xinxiang City, Weihui City, Hebi City, and surrounding areas. The old districts were severely affected, including the First Affiliated Hospital of Zhengzhou University, known as the ‘largest hospital in the universe,’ and the lower terrains with older buildings that are more crowded and have worse ground and underground drainage system.

“By the next day, rescue teams made up of governmental officers, the police, military, firefighters, medical staff, and volunteers began searching for victims and evacuating them. The flooding had receded, and roads were visible again. Everything was covered with mud and sand. The

troops were cleaning the streets.

“We live on the eighth floor of a ten-year-old building. The underground garage was completely flooded. I lost my car. My business, however, being on the second floor of a shopping center, was not severely impacted. But the stores on the first floor were all flooded. Outside the streets were full of washed-away cars, fallen trees, and so much mud.”

Mr. S., who is a rescuer at the National Water Resources Administration, was sent to Xinxiang where the disaster was more extensive than Zhengzhou. He went to reinforce the dam along the Xinxiang section of the Weihe River. He recalled, “Zhengzhou Meteorological Bureau continued to issue red warning signals from 11 in the morning on July 19 throughout the next day. The problem is that government officials in relevant departments were not paying attention. Mainland China has still not formed a set of emergency measures for severe weather warnings. China has not learned the lessons from the Henan floods of August 1975, when heavy rainfalls inundated Zhumadian in Henan Province. More than 1060 mm (41.7 inches) of rain fell in 24 hours, affecting 11 million people, with more than 26,000 people dead.”

“In Hong Kong, when the Observatory issues a Number 8 level typhoon warning, ferries generally stop running and all schools and law courts are closed. People are told to return home immediately or shelter in a safe place and remain there until the danger has passed. Windows and doors should be bolted and shuttered, and cars parked in sheltered areas. Full typhoon precautions should be completed as soon as possible as it is perilous to delay these. As far as I know, Shenzhou, a special coastal city close to Hong Kong, is the only city in mainland China that had adopted similar emergency measures.”

Physicians at the First Affiliated Hospital of Zhengzhou University provided their perspective to the flooding at their hospital also known as “the largest hospital in the universe.” Dr. X, an ICU physician, noted that at 5 p.m. on July 20, at the height of the deluge, the hospital lost power. All elevators were out of service, and the backup power supply was offline and unavailable. “I was manually ventilating patients in the dark. We had to transfer 600 critically ill patients in the ICUs to other hospitals,” he said.

Dr. Z, who is also an administrator at the hospital, said that the water had reached the third floor of the hospital, standing at one meter. They had lost potable water, electricity, internet, medicine, food, while plunged into darkness. Patients with intravenous fluids running, intubated or on oxygen tanks were transferred out. He estimated over 10,000 patients, including elderly and pediatric patients, were transferred.

Dr. Y, a radiologist working on the second floor underground, said the loss of power and flooding ruined all their special imaging machinery and linear accelerators that treat cancer patient with radiation.

Two personal harrowing accounts were provided:

Mr. B., a businessman from Hubei Province, was attending a business meeting that week. “It is summer, my wife and two children all came with me.

“On July 20, I had an appointment at 3:30 p.m. at one of the government buildings. Because of the restriction of the license plate, I planned to drive to the nearest subway station, then take the subway there. When I was approaching the station, several cars in front stopped. I changed lanes and saw the water had flooded the road. We didn’t know how deep it was, so I stopped there as well. At this time an off-road vehicle drove by and managed to get through. We estimated that the water depth was at the bottom of the vehicle. I followed him and got through as well.

“I took Metro Line 1 to the Zhengzhou International Convention & Exhibition Center. At the exit, the street had been completely flooded. Water was pouring out of the subway exits. The elevators were also out of service. Many people crowded around the exit as the streets were completely submerged by this time. MTR (metro transit) workers were using sandbags and plastic films to try to contain the flooding. I ventured out and found the water was to my knees. It was only about a kilometer and a half to the building where I need to go.

“When I came to the street, it was still raining heavily. Apart from the cars floating in the water, I was the only one. I started to feel really scared. By this time, the water had risen to my waist. It took me 40 minutes to walk there. Only a few people were in the office area congregated in groups. Several said they would not go home. Water, electricity, and internet were still available. They were all very agitated, worried if they left, that the flood waters were contaminated with sewage and weren’t safe to wade through, or if the high-voltage line might fall into the water and electrocute them.

“After I finished my work, I left. I needed to get back to my hotel because my wife and two children were there. As I was returning the rain was getting even heavier. I was completely drenched. And worse, the water was climbing higher. I managed to get to the metro. But while we were on the way to Zijingshan station, they announced that the station was flooded, and service were discontinued there. But the station before and after were still functional. So, we just waited there. But then 20 minutes later, they announced that the entire MTR system was flooded, and all services were stopped.

“Thousands of people flew out of the MTR. The streets were completely flooded. A gust of wind blew by, and I began to shiver with cold. And I was also starving. Restaurants were closed due to power outages. A grocery store operating on a generator was open crowded with people stranded by the rains. All the food was sold out. People were frantically calling their families. I managed to get a bowl of hot soup. We heard all public transportation had been suspended. I didn’t think I was going to be able to get back. I needed to find a hotel. I found one available about three kilometers away and headed there.

“The street was in complete darkness. There were police officers helping guide people. I relied on the light from my screen. I didn’t dare use the flashlight on my mobile phone. Finally, at 9:30 I arrived. There were many people crowded in the lobby. The front desk said there was no water, and no electricity. If acceptable, with an ID, I was welcome to check in. Many people who worked nearby had not brought their IDs and were stranded. I was shivering with cold and exhausted, and checked in without hesitation, not knowing how those people without IDs managed. I was able to call my wife, shut my phone down and went to sleep.

“I woke up the next morning and checked through google map that my hotel was 11 kilometers away. Outside the streets were full of washed-out and abandoned cars. I managed to find a bicycle and rode back.”

Ms. A described her nightmare stranded in the fifth carriage of the Metro Line 5:

“I live near Line 5 on Shakou Road and work at a company by Zhengzhou Renmin Hospital station. There is only Haitan Shi station between home and work. Usually, we are off at 6:30 p.m. However, because of the heavy rains, our supervisor let us leave at 4:30 p.m. It is usually an eight-minute walk to the subway, ten minutes by train and then

I’m home.

“When I got down to the street level the water was already above my knees. It took me almost an hour to walk to the station. The station sits fairly high above the ground and was still dry when I arrived. I thought it was safe to ride. I walked into the carriage and waited about ten minutes.

“At around 5:40 p.m., it was full of people, and the train departed. We arrived at Haitan Shi Station without any problems and people came in and out as usual. We waited for another ten minutes. There was an announcement that Shakou Station was flooded, and water began to pour into Haitan Shi station as well. The train started off but then came to a stop again after about a minute. We then saw water began to pour into our carriage. People were trying to leave but the water drove them back into the train and closed the doors. The water level was climbing quickly. A few people in the carriage took charge of the situation and began to organize us. The power was off, and the cellphone signal was unstable. The water had climbed above my knees.

“We were all extremely fearful. I saw a pregnant woman with her two kids—one was two years old, clinging to her, and the other must have been around five. Several people tried to help her. Our carriage was full, and we tried to stay calm and comfort each other. People started to make calls, posting their status on social media, hoping family or friends could inform emergency response teams.

“Suddenly a rush of water raised the level up to my chest. We were cold, hungry, and scared; feeling like we were suffocating. We tried to protect our phones from getting wet. Finally, the government hotline answered the call and told us rescue teams were on the way.

“It was difficult to breath. The water level outside was higher than the inside. We decided not to break the window and endure the suffocation. People were crying. Others were calling their families and leaving ‘I love you’ messages. Several people around me fainted. I also felt that I was losing my mind, unable to keep my eyes open. I sent a final message to one of my best friends, ‘If you did not get my message by two hours, tell my mom and my boyfriend where I was.’

“I didn’t know how much more time had passed. We heard the sounds of footsteps on the roof of the train. The height of the water level outside the train began to drop. The rescuers spent more than an hour opening the door and smashing the windows. At the moment the window was open, I just wanted to fall to the ground, gasping for fresh air. We had been there for almost four hours.

“One rescuer gave me a bottle of water. I was too weak to open or even hold it. I didn’t know who opened it and put it to my lips. Several people had to be carried out. Some people said, help the pregnant woman, children, and women go first. We held our hands one by one and walked up along the subway handrails to the exit. Outside was full of water. We were cold, hungry, and exhausted. At the exit, some volunteers were composed of nearby residents. A couple invited us to their house. About ten of us went there.

“Now, at least, we all had a dry blanket. We fell directly to the ground and fell asleep. At around 4 a.m., I woke up and saw one of the men standing by the window, looking outside. ‘Are you not asleep?’ I didn’t answer and dozed off again. By six in the morning, I was back at my home where my boyfriend was waiting. I could only think how good it was to be alive.”

Global climate change is predicted to make these “once in a millennium” torrents of rain during China’s summer monsoon rains commonplace. Under the climate pressures caused by rising global temperatures the amount and intensity of the rainfalls will increase, and by higher rates than other monsoon regions. Despite the predicted rise in economic loss, the impact on the loss of life and livelihood will be disproportionately higher.

As Mr. S, noted, “Although the heavy rainfall was a natural disaster, there is no country in the world whose ground and underground drainage

system can handle a flood the likes that fell on Zhengzhou.”



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