A “parade of storms” threatens more flooding in British Columbia

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Another deluge is forecast to batter western and southwestern British Columbia on Thursday, threatening many of the same areas hit by historic floods last week. Much of the Fraser River Valley and parts of central BC were inundated after a month of rain fell in just 48 hours.

Meteorologists and climate scientists have expressed urgent concern that the already waterlogged region, which saw mudslides in addition to the flooding of low-lying agricultural land, is ill prepared to handle another downpour. Many parts of the Fraser Valley remain flooded, and recovery efforts to shore up dikes and rebuild roads are threatened by the approaching rains.

The floods were caused by an atmospheric river, a dense column of water vapour from the tropics that condenses upon landfall and can dump large volumes of water in a short period of time. The atmospheric river responsible for last week’s floods created storms that released more than 185 millimetres of rain in less than 48 hours, which is equivalent to what the region typically sees in the entire month of November.

Armel Castellan, a meteorologist at Environment and Climate Change Canada, described the gathering rains as a “parade of storms.” Castellan predicts another 40 to 70 mm of rain in the Fraser Valley, and 100 mm on the North Shore mountains and Howe Sound, just north of Vancouver. The heaviest rains, on the order of 200 to 300 millimetres, are forecast to hit Vancouver Island. The freezing level is also expected to rise above the mountain peaks, causing snowmelt that could contribute to further floods.

Earlier this week, a flood watch was issued for the Haida Gwaii archipelago just off the southern tip of Alaska as an atmospheric river released 300 millimetres of rain. Although the storm system moving into southwestern B.C. on Thursday is not expected to discharge as much rain, experts predict it will last longer than last week’s storms, raising the danger of further mudslides and floods.

The number of deaths attributed to the initial floods has grown to four. All of the victims were buried in a mudslide that occurred after heavy rains fell on the northern stretch of Highway 99, northeast of Vancouver.

The bodies of Anita and Mirsad Hadzic, a couple from Vancouver returning home from a vacation, were recovered between Monday and Thursday last week. Also found in the debris was the body of Steven Taylor, a construction worker and rugby player originally from Calgary, Alberta, and Brett Diederichs, who was in the process of moving to Victoria. A fifth man is still considered missing.

Scenes of devastation are now ubiquitous across the Fraser Valley, the agricultural centre of the province. Eyewitness accounts describe the now flooded Sumas Prairie region near the city of Abbotsford as a lake, where what initially appear as little islands are actually the roofs of submerged barns. The flood zones were once a shallow lake, home to the Sumas First Nation before they were shunted off by the BC government in the 1920s. The lake was then drained and parceled off as farmland.

Close to 200 people were evacuated from flooded sectors of Abbotsford on November 16 as the Barrowtown water pump station neared critical failure. North Shore Rescue leader Mike Danks described harrowing nighttime evacuations of area residents, with children being airlifted from their homes with only their teddy bears and the clothes on their back, as flood waters rapidly approached.

Danks paid tribute to the herculean efforts of volunteers and community members, who went out in force and did what they could to shore up dikes and other flood defences. They also took it upon themselves to evacuate others by motorboat and conduct reconnaissance by private helicopter. “We were just one little cog in the machine,” Danks told *North Shore News*.

At least 14,000 people are currently still displaced from their homes on account of the floods, including 6,500 registered as evacuees whose homes are considered flooded. Several dozen properties in the Sumas Prairie district alone remain on high alert for evacuation. In the central city of Merritt, 7,000 residents have been cleared to return to their homes, though a significant number of those are in fact submerged. People in smaller and rural communities who

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rely on private water supplies have been instructed to monitor their supply for contaminants introduced by the floods.

Efforts are underway to restore roads and railways in order to repair supply chains from Vancouver to the province's interior and beyond. Both the Trans Canada Highway linking Vancouver to the country's east and the important transportation artery known as the Coquihalla Highway were partially flooded. The former has been restored to serviceable status to provide emergency access to agriculture and transportation. Other roads have been washed away in chunks, such as Highway 8 that links Merritt to the Trans Canada Highway.

With thousands of BC residents shattered by the floods and restoration efforts jeopardized by the approaching storms, anger at the provincial New Democratic Party government is reaching a crescendo. The response of Premier John Horgan and his government has been marked by gross negligence and callous indifference, the same traits it has exhibited in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed at least 2,257 people in the province.

Horgan declared a 14-day state of emergency on November 17 and requested assistance from the Canadian Armed Forces to aid with evacuation and restoration efforts. Tensions are high in the wake of a public order limiting those in affected areas to 30 litres of gas per station visit until December 1, and the rapid emptying of store shelves as a result of disrupted supply chains.

It quickly emerged that the government refused to activate the automated Alert Ready system to better prepare the population for the rains, despite forecasts well in advance of last week's storm. In comparison, the Northwest Territories, with a fraction of BC's population, has used the system four times this year to alert residents to important emergencies via a prominent smartphone message.

When widespread criticism erupted on social media to this revelation, Public Safety Minister Mike Farnworth crudely insulted his detractors as "experts on Twitter" who were not "on the ground dealing with the local situation and understanding the local conditions," despite many of them being first responders and residents experiencing the storm firsthand.

Adding insult to injury, people who have lost or suffered damage to their homes can expect a measly $2,000 cheque from the provincial government, barely enough to fund a month's rent for a modest apartment in BC's major cities. The federal Liberal government, not to be outdone, announced as a ground-breaking initiative the waiving of a requirement for applicants to show a record of employment to file Employment Insurance claims.

The Liberal government handed Canada's banks and corporations $650 billion in aid virtually overnight to improve profitability and shareholder dividends in the early stages of the pandemic. This largesse helped Canada's billionaires get $78 billion richer in 2020.

Beyond their immediate negligence, the Horgan NDP are guilty, just like their Liberal predecessors under Christy Clark, of willfully ignoring repeated scientific warnings of impending climate disasters. Meanwhile, Horgan has embraced efforts to build a liquefied natural gas pipeline to the west coast, as well as the logging of old growth forests.

A 2020 study from Environment and Climate Change Canada asserted, like many studies before it, that climate change had made rainfall more extreme, and such storms more frequent. A report by the provincial government in 2015 found that 53 out of 75 dikes in the Lower Mainland region were vulnerable to breakdown. Three years later, the BC Auditor-General announced that the provincial government lacked an adequate plan to manage risks posed by climate change. Absolutely nothing has been done in the interim to address these concerns.

The rapid pace of environmental disasters BC has witnessed in just one year include a heat dome in June that led to the deaths of over 600 vulnerable residents, a devastating summer season of wildfires precipitated by the heat dome and an ensuing drought, and now a season of flash floods and mudslides that is far from over.

Like the COVID-19 pandemic that continues to rage, all questions of protecting the health, lives, and homes of ordinary people are subordinated by the NDP and capitalist governments around the world to the corporate drive for profit and the enrichment of a tiny financial oligarchy. Such a system of mass death and endless greed is incapable of responding to climate change, the pandemic, and other major social problems. Working people must take up a struggle to replace it with a workers' government committed to socialist policies.

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