Massive floods in South Asia kill hundreds, displace millions

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Heavy monsoon rains across South Asia since March, mainly affecting India and Bangladesh, have caused floods and landslides with hundreds dead and missing, and millions displaced. Flood survivors face immense hardships because of government failures to take adequate emergency and relief measures.

In India, over 600 have died and more than five million have been affected. The northeastern states of Assam and Meghalaya have been hardest hit—at least 200 have died with over 4 million impacted. The Indian National Emergency Response Centre reported 168 deaths in Himachal Pradesh, 60 in Maharashtra, 46 in Bihar, 46 in Madhya Pradesh, 36 in Gujarat and 36 in Meghalaya with 56 missing.

In Bangladesh, at least 17 of the country's 64 districts, mostly in the north and the northeastern Sylhet region, have been hit. More than 100 people have been killed with over 7 million flood affected. The *New Age* reported on July 3: "The inhabitants in shoals of northern regions are, however, bearing the worst brunt, with many living in submerged houses or on embankments for about a month."

Floods and hundreds of landslides have damaged river embankments, roads, houses and crops, with devastating consequences for livestock, domestic animals and poultry. Survivors are sheltering in makeshift camps without adequate drinking water and food—also they are contracting water-borne diseases.

The floods are compounding the social crisis caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. According to the understated official figures, there have been over 525,000 deaths and 43 million cases in India, with 30,000 deaths and nearly two million cases in Bangladesh.

The Indian and Bangladesh governments have responded to the crisis with contempt for the victims, refusing to provide adequate relief materials, rescue equipment, medicine, trained personnel and safe, useable infrastructure.

The callous indifference of government authorities is generating widespread anger among survivors. On June 30, the All Assam Students' Union held protests across Assam state to demand flood relief. Just days before, people from southern Assam's Barak Valley residing in Delhi, demonstrated to demand relief materials and a special economic package to rehabilitate the flood-hit Silchar area.

Attempting to dissipate the anger, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma visited Silchar but had to admit that relief materials were not reaching many of 280,000 flood survivors. In a crude attempt to deflect anger away from his government, he tried to blame the "unprecedented" floods in Silchar on the actions of "some miscreants" who he alleged had breached "the embankment at Bethukandi" and proposed posting police to the site in the future.

The northeastern Sylhet region in Bangladesh has been severely affected. "Dozens of people have died, many of them young children, in the worst floods northeast Bangladesh has seen in more than a century. More than four million people have been left stranded," the BBC reported late last month.

Khudeza Begum, 50, a mother of seven, who lost her husband to cancer, was living in Companiganj district when the waters started to rise. She told the BBC that her family had to leave their home when the water level rose to her chest. They tried to escape by boat with her family.

"As we were traveling, it capsized," Begum said. "My children and I survived by swimming and holding onto a tree… I couldn't save my rice or my duck, chicken, cow or goat. They were all drowned. I have to

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say, I have nothing left except my life."

As reported by the *New Nation* on June 30, the Pandargaon union council chair in Sylhet said that "80 percent of the people have lost rice, potato and livestock stored in their houses." The government, according to flood management experts, "has not developed its capacity to tackle recurring flash floods in the region," the newspaper said.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited the flood-hit areas of Netrokona, Sunamganj and Sylhet districts by helicopter on June 21, telling survivors they "should not panic over the floods." The people of Bangladesh, she declared "always have to be prepared to face such natural disasters."

Bangladeshis face floods on an almost annual basis, with many losing their lives and livelihoods because successive governments, including those led by Hasina, have failed to take the necessary flood mitigation measures to control these "natural disasters."

After feigning concern and offering a few empty platitudes, Hasina played the nationalist card, declaring that the floods impacting on the Sylhet region, had come from the Indian states of Meghalaya and Assam. She then left the survivors to fend for themselves.

Bangladeshi authorities have said that Sylhet was flooded because all 54 floodgates at the Gajoldoba barrage on the Indian side of Teesta River were suddenly opened on June 9. The *New Age* reported on June 11, that this led to inundation of 63 villages from five northern districts, Rangpur, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari and Gaibandha, affecting over 100,000 people.

In 2010, India and Bangladesh initiated discussions on a Teesta water-sharing treaty under the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission, claiming that this would resolve flooding issues.

Although the leaders of India and Bangladesh have held several rounds of talks for a Teesta water-sharing treaty, it has not materialised.

Any rational solution to the issue of flooding as well as irrigation and water sharing is blocked by the reactionary 1947 partition of British India into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India. The ruling classes in Bangladesh and India defend their own narrow interests at the expense of lives and social needs of the vast majority of the population in both countries.

Government claims that floods in South Asia are "natural" are a lie. The social catastrophes generated by monsoonal rains and cyclones are created by capitalism and its irrational and destructive drive for profits. This includes unplanned urbanisation, as well as increased fossil-fuel burning leading to global warming, which threatens not just Bangladesh but low-lying countries across the globe.

The *science.thewire.in* website on June 22 stated: "Climate change was likely to have made the rains that unleashed catastrophic flooding across Bangladesh worse." Quoting climate scientists, it warned: "While South Asia's monsoon rains follow natural atmospheric patterns, the rains will become more erratic and torrential as global temperatures continue to climb."

Placing profits of big business and foreign investors over human lives, India and Bangladesh have heavily invested on transport and power infrastructure development for investors and high military spending while providing little for disaster prevention and relief.

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