

# Italy hit by worst floods in a century

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The worst flash floods in a century claimed 13 lives in Italy this week, left 20,000 people homeless and thousands more without power. Two dozen rivers burst their banks in the northern Emilia-Romagna region, causing nearly 300 landslides, affecting 41 cities and towns, damaging 400 roads and submerging 5,000 farms. Cracks in river embankments mean other areas are still at risk.

The catastrophe is the latest in a spree of natural disasters in Italy now being made a regular fact of life by capitalism-driven climate change. It follows floods in the same region just two weeks earlier which killed two people and caused an estimated €1-2 billion in damages.

Formula 1's Imola race scheduled to take place in the region this weekend has been cancelled, while musician-songwriter Bruce Springsteen was widely criticised for his selfish and insensitive decision to go ahead with a concert in Ferrara Thursday evening.

An average of more than two months' rainfall fell in just 36 hours across Wednesday-Thursday, rising to six months' rainfall (50cm) in some areas. Luca Mercalli, president of the Italian Meteorological Society, commented that "two records were broken in 15 days in the same region. An event like the one that occurred on 2 May might happen once in a century, but then another hit 15 days later."

The response from the neo-fascist Meloni government has been totally inadequate, with rescue efforts hampered by flooded roads. A crisis meeting has been called for next Tuesday.

Residents and experts have pointed to failures to prepare adequate flood defences or regulate the development of riverbanks. Civil Protection Minister Nello Musumeci admitted no regional dams had been built for 40 years. A 2018 report by the European Court of Auditors found problems with the implementation of flood protection plans across the continent, specifically

citing one river basin in Italy with an estimated €1.1 billion gap between planned and available spending.

Addressing the problem of unplanned, profit-hungry urban and agricultural development, President of the National Council of Geologists Arcangelo Francesco Violo referred to the impact of "intensive and disorderly urbanisation in recent decades along with high density soil consumption."

Biologist Andrea Agapito of WWF Italia commented likewise that riverside vegetation, with a vital "sponge effect", had been removed and "areas of natural flooding... occupied by settlements and crops." The organisation called for "A climate change adaptation policy that goes beyond how to handle emergencies and considers the effects of ordinary planning."

But the Italian government only published its National Plan for Adaptation to Climate Change last December, after close to four years of delay and amid criticisms of severe underfunding.

Moreover, even if fully funded, such measures can only address the first symptoms of a runaway climate crisis which will overrun all "adaptations" if left unchecked. Italy's civil protection agency estimates that 94 percent of its municipalities are prone to natural disasters. Violo commented that the floods were part of a chain of "extreme [weather] events that have a major impact on urban territory", even in areas where "maintenance is carried out."

The latest floods are the product of two climate change-related processes. The first is "An increase in rainfall overall per year, for example, but a decrease in the number of rainy days and an increase in the intensity of the rain in those few days when it rains," in the words of Antonello Pasini, a climate scientist at Italy's National Research Council.

The impact of the torrential rain was then exacerbated by the effects of the prolonged drought Italy suffered, along with much of Europe, last year—the continent's

worst on record and likely the worst in the last half a millennium.

Europe is warming roughly twice as quickly as the global average, already 2.2 degrees Celsius hotter over the past five years compared to the pre-industrial average. 2022 saw the continent's hottest ever recorded summer, with roughly 20,000 people killed by extreme heat.

In Italy, average summer temperatures were consistently two/three degrees above the seasonal average, and in some places 10 degrees above. The heat itself killed over 700 people across 33 major cities, a 20 percent rise over earlier averages. It also hardened the soil, increasing the risk of severe flooding.

Mauro Rossi, a researcher from Italy's National Research Council (CNR), explained how prolonged drought "dries the soil and modifies its permeability in various ways", which, coupled with "extreme rain events", makes flooding much more likely.

Similar causes contributed to the deaths of 12 people on the southern island Ischia in a landslide triggered by torrential rain last November; 11 people in flash floods last September in the Marche region; and another 11 in an ice avalanche in the Italian Alps last July. Such events are becoming increasingly common, threatening livelihoods as well as lives.

According to Italy's farmers' association Coldiretti, extreme weather events in Italy have been five times more frequent this year than a decade ago, based on data from the European Severe Weather Database. The organisation commented, "This multiplication of extreme events has caused over six billion euros' worth of damage to agriculture in 2022, 10 percent of the [value of] national production." The drought caused crop yields to fall by up to 45 percent last year.

Italy's experience is not unique. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre reported that a record 126,000 people were forced from their homes by flooding in Europe and Central Asia in 2020. Major storms displaced 6,200 people.

In 2021, floods across Europe killed at least 243 people most of them in Germany and Belgium—left 200,000 homes without power and caused tens of billions of euros' worth of damage. It was the deadliest natural disaster in Germany since the 1962 North Sea Flood, killing close to 200 people in the fourth richest economy in the world.

Thirty-nine climate scientists from the World Weather Attribution group have since concluded that the warmer air resulting from global heating, allowing it to hold more water vapour, made the disaster 1.2-9 times more likely to happen, increasing the intensity of downpours in the region by 3-19 percent.

The effects of climate change are even more devastating in the Global South. Events in Italy are currently paralleled by those in Somalia, where flash flooding after the worst drought in four decades has killed at least 22 people and displaced a quarter of a million, according to the Somali Disaster Management Agency. The drought killed an estimated 43,000 last year—half of them children under five.

Pakistan is still reeling from the worst floods in its history last summer, and one of the costliest in world history, killing over 1,700 people, displacing millions; destroying well over a million houses, 22,000 schools and 13,000km of roads; killing over a million livestock and devastating swathes of agricultural land.

The causes of these disasters, and how to reverse them, are known and have been for decades. Two months ago, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published the final instalment of its Sixth Assessment Report stating unequivocally that "There is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all," requiring "Deep, rapid, and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions" and "Rapid and far-reaching transitions".

It politely noted "gaps" between policy pledges and reality and in required global investment, "barriers to redirect[ing] capital to climate action" and "finance flows fall[ing] short of the levels needed." In plain English, this means that the capitalist class is incapable of solving the climate crisis, with every new disaster showing the consequences for the rest of humanity.

What is required is a revolutionary transformation of ownership and production, replacing the blindly destructive guiding principle of private profit with the planned and sustainable fulfilment of human needs.



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