

South Korean flood deaths expose government indifference to climate change

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Five more bodies were recovered from a flooded underground road in central South Korea on Monday, bringing the number of people officially dead or missing in torrential rainstorms, landslides and floods over the past week to 50.

Through a search operation, fire authorities found 17 vehicles waterlogged in the underpass, including a bus, whose driver had drowned, exceeding their previous estimate.

This tragic death toll in Cheongju, the capital and largest city of North Chungcheong Province, has caused widespread anger. It has also highlighted the failure of governments internationally to protect people from the extreme weather events fuelled by climate change.

Almost 300 mm of rain is reported to have fallen across South Korea on Saturday alone. So far, with rains still falling, people have died in terrible torrents and landslides, thousands have lost their homes and more than 10,000 have been evacuated.

This is the latest in a series of floods this month that have killed more than 200 people and forced hundreds of thousands to flee their homes across Asia, including in Pakistan, India, China, Japan, Cambodia and the Philippines.

South Korea regularly experiences annual monsoonal flooding, but deaths have usually been relatively low until now, with the corporate media depicting the country as typically well-prepared. The events of the past week have shaken that image.

This is the second year of record-breaking rains and flooding, which left more than 11 people dead last year, including two women and a teenager trapped in one of the many cramped semi-basement flats in the capital Seoul. Yet this year's toll is much higher.

In Cheongju, victims' families have criticised

authorities for not shutting off access to the road tunnel earlier, when flood warnings were already in place. Residents accused them of presiding over a "man-made disaster."

Kong Seong-pyo, a 60-year-old resident who frequently uses the underpass, said the government should have restricted access to the tunnel when flooding was expected. "I would have also died if I were submerged. I have no words to express this frustrating feeling," Kong told Reuters.

Another resident, Jang Chan-gyo, said more should have been done to prevent the nearby river from bursting its banks. "They have been warning us to be prepared for the rainy season from a week ago, but it doesn't make sense why the authorities did not preemptively build a strong levee that could have prevented the disaster," he told the Yonhap news agency.

In response, the provincial government said its emergency response manual did not require the tunnel's immediate closure under those conditions.

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, facing public outrage, went into damage-control on Monday vowing to "completely overhaul" how the country responds to such events, which he presented as simply inevitable. "Extreme weather events like this will become commonplace. We must accept that climate change is happening and deal with it," he said.

During the disaster Yoon had been on a trip to the NATO summit in Lithuania, where he further aligned his government with the escalating war against Russia, and then to Ukraine. There he met President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and pledged to provide aid worth \$US150 million this year, up from \$US100 million last year, and increase shipments of "nonlethal" military equipment such as body armour and helmets.

To quell discontent over the flood calamity, Yoon ordered military deployments to devastated areas across the country. He also announced the designation of “special disaster zones” eligible for state support.

At the same time, Yoon sought to foist responsibility onto local authorities, saying that a lack of proper management in flood-prone areas had caused many casualties. Both the police and the Office for Government Policy Coordination announced investigations into why a traffic restriction was not imposed for the underpass and whether embankments along the Miho River had been properly managed.

This is far from the first governmental failure, however. Last August too there was a public outcry when no official guidelines and preventative measures were initiated after that month’s flood disaster in Seoul. It was revealed that flood prevention funding had been cut by 17.6 percent, or 89.6 billion won, that year, compared to the previous year.

South Korean scientists warned of further calamities, including extreme heat waves, related to climate change, and that rising sea levels could partially submerge parts of the country by 2030, including three of the largest cities: Seoul, Incheon and Busan.

Invariably, across Asia, as elsewhere, it is the poorest layers of the population, whether workers or small farmers, who are suffering the most from frequent climate-related catastrophes, such as floods, heatwaves, wildfires and droughts.

Last week, Japan’s Kyushu island reported record-breaking floods, which left at least eight people dead and others still missing, and forced the evacuation of over 420,000 people. More than 40,000 people in China’s Sichuan province were evacuated because of floods that destroyed homes, damaged infrastructure and killed several people.

In northern India, just after blistering heat waves, authorities said almost 100 people had died in the past fortnight due to landslides, flash floods and property collapses. Monsoon rains in Pakistan since late June have killed at least 91 people, a year after floods killed 1,739 people and affected 33 million people.

Cambodia’s capital Phnom Penh was hit by flash floods last week, following what officials said was the “heaviest rainfall in three years.” In the Philippines, heavy floods occurred in the capital Manila.

Extreme rainfall and flooding have hit other regions

also, including West Africa between May and October 2022 and New Zealand this February.

For decades, scientists have warned of the disastrous impact of global warming, which includes heavier and more intense rainfall events caused by greater amounts of moisture being held in the heated atmosphere.

A study by the World Weather Attribution (WWA) network of last year’s flood catastrophe in Pakistan concluded that it was “likely” that climate change played a part, although natural weather patterns like the monsoon may have been involved too.

The WWA further stated that record-breaking heat across Spain, Portugal and northwest Africa this April was made at least 100 times more likely due to climate change. That danger has been further evident in recent weeks, with massive fires across Canada, producing potentially deadly smoke pollution in both Canada and the US, and more extreme heatwaves in parts of Europe and northern Africa, as well as North America.

Such are the extremities that in some countries, such as the US, India and China, searing temperatures have hit populations in areas, while heavy rain has caused floods in others, such as the northeast US last week.

However, despite the clear warnings of scientists since the 1960s and the overwhelming evidence that climate change is contributing to ever-greater hazards, profit-driven capitalist governments, based on rival nation-states, have failed to take the necessary globally-coordinated measures to avert the resulting disasters and threat to the future of humanity.

It is increasingly clear that combating the climate crisis is incompatible with a global economic order that places private profit over human life and the environment, and pours trillions of dollars into war operations and preparations that also threaten the people of the planet. The only solution is a fight by the working class, as an international force, to overturn capitalism and redirect the resources needed to establish production on a scientific, global and socialist basis.



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