

Record rainfall leads to massive flooding in northern China

Lily Zhao
15 August 2023

Sixteen cities and provinces in northeastern China have experienced record rainfall and flooding since July 29 as a result of Typhoon Doksuri. The huge downpour has already caused 62 deaths with another 34 reported missing. It has wreaked havoc on the lives of hundreds of millions, many of whom had no power or water for days, were stranded on roof tops or had their homes and properties ruined.

As the flooding continues, the still unfolding catastrophe is yet another warning about the initial but already disastrous consequences of climate change.

From July 29 to August 2, unprecedented levels of rainfall deluged Beijing, the adjacent municipal city of Tianjin and Hebei Province that surrounds both cities. Beijing experienced the heaviest rainfall in 140 years. The precipitation over 83 hours exceeded 60 percent of that for a year under normal conditions; the maximum hourly precipitation in Tianjin reached 54.8 mm (2.16 inches); and Hebei experienced 1,003mm (39.5 inches) of rain in just three days.

Typhoon Doksuri then moved further north to the northeastern provinces of Heilongjiang and Jilin. Shulan, one of the hardest hit cities in Jilin Province, recorded 489 mm (19.3 inches) of precipitation. The rising water levels of more than 25 rivers in Heilongjiang Province have triggered alarming overflows.

Social media videos showed cars pushed around and bumping into each other in the torrential water. In many places, the muddy water almost reached the top of trucks and trees. When waters receded, there were scenes of devastation: the debris of crushed cars, fallen branches, bricks and mud everywhere on the streets. Many paved roads were unusable as portions had been washed away.

One resident in Zhuozhou, one of the hardest hit cities in Hebei, explained: "Only my grandfather and I were at home. Everyone else was stranded too, so no one could come and help me. We were without power, water or phone service for three days and three nights. My neighborhood felt like an isolated island in the sea, surrounded by nothing but water. There were inflated boats on the street. The water level was about to immerse the traffic lights. Only empty shelves were left in every store."

The scope of damage is enormous. According to a Beijing government press conference on August 9, 1.29 million people were affected by the flooding, 59,000 houses collapsed, 147,000 more houses were severely damaged, and 225,000 mu (37,000 acres) of agricultural products were destroyed. The worst affected areas of Beijing are the more rural Mentougou, Fangshan and Changping districts in the western and mountainous side of the city.

Due to landslides, three trains inbound for Beijing with 2,831 passengers and staff were stranded in the mountains for more than four days. In the city, Beijing's government hotline received more

than 33,000 calls during the storm from July 29 to August 1.

In most affected cities, tens of thousands, in some cases hundreds of thousands, of people had to be evacuated. Contact was lost with dozens of villages for days, as landslides either destroyed or blocked the few paved access roads. Re-establishing contact and rescuing stranded residents has been extremely difficult.

In Changping, a team of 15 firefighters were only able to reach 583 stranded villagers after trekking through mountains on foot and crossing rivers by rope. In other cases, helicopters had to drop critical supplies to trapped residents. One resident from Hebei posted on social media: "All our houses were built beneath the mountain. Many small villages were completely washed away by the flood and the mud-and-stone flow. One of our doctors had to walk to [another village] to find service to send out a signal asking for help."

Zhuozhou, a city in Hebei with more than 600,000 people, was one of the worst affected. Downstream from three overflowing rivers, most streets and towns in Zhuozhou were submerged with water levels reaching two to three metres. In some cases, the second floor of apartment buildings flooded. Most of Zhuozhou has been without any power or water. In some areas, water has still not been restored.

As with every other so-called natural disaster, it is workers and peasants who are impacted hardest. Almost without any exceptions, the worst affected have been rural villages, where houses were destroyed, crops inundated, and stock washed away.

One person from Fangshan district in Beijing, stranded for more than six days, returned home to collect a few essentials to find the house destroyed: "At first I thought I was living in a nightmare. I wanted to cry but could not make out a sound. In the debris of the collapsed house, we flipped and moved stones and stones in the mud. We were trying to find valuables like cameras and phones, running the risk of a second collapse of the house... Upon hearing the deaths and casualties from the village next door, I could only feel grief and thought that I survived only because of sheer luck."

The damage to property is vast. Insurance companies across the 16 affected cities and provinces have so far received 189,100 claims worth 6.241 billion RMB (\$862.4 million). Most involve damaged cars, corporate properties and agricultural products. More than 40,000 houses collapsed in Hebei Province, while another 155,500 were severely damaged.

Crops of grains, oil seed, vegetables, fruit and medical herbs suffered the heaviest damage. The city of Wuchang in Heilongjiang Province, a major supplier of grain, has about 2.5 million mu (412,000 acres) of rice, but more than 1 million were inundated. In Hebei, 319,700 acres were affected.

Reconstruction work will take years, not months. The city

government of Beijing has estimated it will take a whole year to repair and restore infrastructure, reconstruct the collapsed houses and carry out necessary relevant public health measures. In the case of Hebei, the provincial government declared that two years would be needed to restore damaged buildings and facilities.

In the course of the flooding, it has been working people who have demonstrated immense courage and selflessness in helping others. Across many affected neighborhoods, volunteers have run community kitchens and temporary clinics. Volunteer squads were organized to rescue stranded residents. Tens of thousands of ordinary working people have made donations and some set up a free food station near a base for rescue teams. Social media reported that drivers in Heilongjiang had parked their heavy trucks along the road to form a barrier against the flood waters.

Two volunteers from Blue Sky Rescue, a non-government rescue team, Wang Hongchun, 41, and Liu Jianmin, 47, were drowned in flood waters as they attempted to rescue a young mother and her three-year-old child stranded after their home was inundated.

Train K396 to Beijing was stranded at a station during the storm near the rural town of Luopoling for more than four days. The food on board ran out within hours and the tiny town organized dozens of small grocery and convenience stores to provide food for the 900 passengers. With the road to the train blocked by landslides, train staff trekked miles in torrential rain, as high voltage wires dangled overhead, to bring back food. The list could go on.

By contrast, the response of the government has been limited to date. The state-owned media has been full of praise for the state's emergency efforts. By August 11, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Emergency Management had allocated just 1.46 billion RMB (\$200 million) from the government disaster fund to provide relief, restore infrastructure and production and begin reconstruction.

On August 6, Xinhua News Agency published a glowing special editorial declaring, "General Secretary Xi Jinping immediately made important instructions on flood prevention work," urging relevant ministries and departments to "make every effort to carry out rescue and disaster relief work." The editorial was written at Xi's direction.

Such platitudes are issued after every natural disaster. However, critical questions are raised about what had been done to prevent this catastrophe from happening. The Beijing city government claimed to have issued a "red" warning about expected heavy rainfall, urging residents "not to go outside unless necessary" and "not to go to work unless necessary." But without any binding force, many people, especially in the private sector, were required to show up to work.

Limited measures were taken to evacuate people and shut down construction sites. According to Beijing officials, 42,000 were relocated in advance and 3,554 construction projects stopped. However, many complaints on social media indicate that residents in rural areas were not notified in advance.

As for Hebei Province, the official press conference made no mention about warnings or measures to mitigate the impact prior to the floods, which is a damning indictment by itself.

Even though flooding in northern China is not as common as in the southeast, serious floods have repeatedly occurred. These include a massive flooding in the eastern coastal province of Shandong in 2018; in Henan Province in July 2021 causing 300 deaths; and in Hebei's city of Xingtai in 2016 leaving more than 100 dead.

For many Beijing residents, the memory of the record storm in July 2012 remains vivid. Fangshan District was the hardest hit when the rain triggered landslides. Of the 79 killed in the disaster, 38 were from

Fangshan. Nevertheless, more than a decade later, the measures put into place are still very inadequate. In the working-class neighborhoods, one can still see broken or naked wires dangling as workers wade through knee deep water during the storm season every summer, running the risk of electric shocks.

The severity of the latest record rainfall and flooding is yet another demonstration of the destructiveness of climate change and global warming. Scientists have warned for decades that more intense rainfalls will be triggered as greater levels of moisture accumulate in the heated atmosphere. It is not a coincidence that the current flooding disaster was preceded by the worst heat wave on record across China with many cities experiencing temperatures over 40°C (104°F).

Extreme weather is becoming more frequent and more severe. What northern China has experienced is part of a global issue, as the Earth's ecosystem is destroyed by the irrational profit-driven capitalist system. Just in the past month, floods have devastated Slovenia, Austria, South Korea, and the states of Vermont and New York in the US. At the same time, massive mountain fires are raging across Canada; extreme heat waves hit Europe, northern Africa and North America. The latest disaster is the Maui wildfires in Hawaii.

Climate change is a global disaster that can only be resolved through a scientifically grounded, internationally coordinated plan. However, the global climate change fora have manifestly failed to take adequate measures as capitalist governments, including that of China, pursue their own narrow national economic and political interests.

Within China, the Chinese Communist Party has set long-term goals that clearly fail to stop and reverse the emission of greenhouse gases that are the major factor in climate change. The "peak carbon dioxide emission by 2030" campaign, heavily promoted as its commitment to a green economy, only slows greenhouse gas emission but does not reduce it until at least into the next decade.

The latest heat waves and disastrous flooding in China is further evidence that, as numbers of climate scientists have warned, climate change is reaching, or may have already reached, an irreversible tipping point that foreshadows even greater climate catastrophes.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact