

Libyan officials warn Derna flood death toll could reach 20,000

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The horrific scope of the death and destruction caused by Storm Daniel across eastern Libya continues to emerge, as rescuers and reporters arrive in the flood zone. Towns across eastern Libya are devastated, with 11,300 confirmed dead as of last night in Derna, which was flooded by a massive wall of water after two dams burst. Its mayor, Abdulmenam al-Ghaithi, has warned that the death toll in his city alone could reach 20,000.

“The estimated number of deaths in the city could reach between 18,000 to 20,000, based on the number of buildings in the districts destroyed by the flood,” Gaithi told Al-Arabiya television. “We actually need teams specialised in recovering bodies. I fear that the city will be infected with an epidemic due to the large number of bodies under the rubble and in the water.”

The failure to maintain basic infrastructure and to prepare emergency response policies, flowing from the 2011 NATO war in Libya that plunged the country into an ongoing 12-year civil war, has exacted a horrific human cost.

Inhabitants of Derna heard what sounded like explosions when the two dams burst, and shortly afterwards the city was submerged under seven-meter high waves. “I heard a whoosh, I thought it was an aeroplane. The force of the water collapsed my neighbour’s house,” one man told the *Financial Times*. When he left his home after the flood waters receded, he added, “I was walking on corpses.”

Another survivor said that he and his mother barely managed to reach safety by scrambling inside a house that was not carried off by the flood waters. He added, “The scene I saw afterwards, whatever I say, it’s impossible to describe. Bodies were floating on the water, cars were floating by, girls were screaming. It lasted an hour or an hour and a half, but it felt like more than a year.”

A quarter of Derna was swept out to sea, and thousands of bodies are still trapped under the rubble of buildings or are washing up ashore. The victims “are being buried in mass graves. There’s no time or space to bury them in single graves. We removed 500 bodies in a single operation,” said Osama Ali, a spokesman for the Ambulance and Emergency Center in Libya. Rescuers are calling for emergency shipments of body bags to the region.

“Bodies are everywhere, inside houses, in the streets, at sea. Wherever you go, you find dead men, women, and children. Entire families were lost,” aid worker Emad al-Falah told AP.

Rescue efforts are further complicated because only two of the seven roads into Derna survived the floods. Currently, many rescue workers are forced to rely on helicopters for transportation, and water and electricity are cut off in the city.

Other cities near Derna have also been shattered. Journalist Mohamed Eljarh said that rescuers had still not reached the coastal city of Susah and other nearby villages. In Susah, he said, “Hundreds of homes are buried under mud, debris and water. No help has arrived. Other areas have been similarly affected. The death toll is going to be staggering.”

This is the product of the 12 years of fighting since the 2011 NATO war on Libya and the ensuing eruption of civil war between governments in eastern and western Libya. Rival militias whom the NATO powers had supported as their proxies to wage war on Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s regime have tore the country apart. As Libya’s economy fell by half, and major oil companies plundered Libya’s oil wealth, nothing was spent on dam repair or emergency services.

The risk of a flood catastrophe was well known to scientists and state officials in Libya. Last year,

hydrologist Abdelwanees A. R. Ashoor of Omar Al-Mukhtar University published a paper warning that a major flood in Derna would be “likely to cause one of the two dams to collapse.” He wrote, “If a huge flood happens, the result will be catastrophic for the people of the wadi and the city.”

Another scholarly journal also published last year by Sebha University similarly warned of the poor maintenance of the Derna dams and called for urgent action. “The results that were obtained demonstrate that the studied area is at risk of flooding,” its findings stated. “Therefore, immediate measures must be taken for routine maintenance of the dams, because in the event of a big flood, the consequences will be disastrous for the residents of the valley and the city.”

But with local authorities controlled by rival NATO-backed militias focused on waging war against each other, such warnings went unheeded. Moreover, the warnings and evacuation orders that would have been given by Libya’s meteorological service prior to the NATO war were not issued, because the meteorological service has collapsed during the past 12 years of fighting.

Petteri Taalas of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in Geneva told RFI: “Before, Libya had a relatively modern meteorological service, but this is no longer the case. It virtually does not work at all anymore. The observation network is virtually destroyed. Thus, the storm arrived but virtually no evacuation took place. Of course we could not have avoided economic losses, but we could have avoided most of the human losses.”

WMO officials said they issued warnings and contacted Libyan officials 72 hours before the dams collapsed, which led to the declaration of a state of emergency in Libya. But instead of ordering an evacuation of low-lying areas, the eastern Libyan government’s Interior Ministry ordered a curfew. This forced inhabitants of these cities to stay in the path of the flood surge unleashed by the dam collapse.

Libyan prosecutors have now launched an investigation into the disaster response to decide whether to press negligence charges against any officials.

Above all, however, responsibility for the disaster lies with the NATO imperialist powers who launched a war for regime change in Libya with catastrophic

consequences. The failure of dams and of critical public services in the Derna region flow from the fact that all of Libya has been plundered for over a decade by imperialism.

There are mounting indications of mounting popular anger at the handling of the floods, and of fear in ruling circles of the working population.

Al-Jazeera reported that the Libyan National Army (LNA) militia of warlord and CIA asset Khalifa Haftar, which controls Derna, is stopping journalists from entering Derna and confiscating their cell phones.

Fadellalah, an IT worker in the Libyan capital, Tripoli, whose family lived in Derna, spoke to the Associated Press (AP). He said he had called his family on Sunday to urge them to move to higher ground, but that now at least 13 members of his family are confirmed dead and 20 are missing. “Some of them didn’t have cars. They didn’t have a way to get out,” he said.

AP noted that Fadelallah “asked that his surname not be used because he fears reprisals from government officials and armed groups who could view his story as criticism of their efforts.”



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