

Humanitarian crisis looms in Kenya and East Africa as floods kill over 400 and displace tens of thousands

Kipchumba Ochieng
7 May 2024

The impact of El Niño heavy rains and flooding has wreaked havoc on the lives of millions across Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. This is now being compounded by the impact of Cyclone Hidaya in the coastal areas of East Africa.

No sector has been left unscathed. Torrential rains and flash floods have caused hundreds of deaths, tens of thousands of displaced, the collapse of entire infrastructures and the destruction of crops.

Kenya has been particularly badly affected. According to the National Disaster Operations Centre, an estimated 210 people have been killed, 164 injured, and 72 left missing, while 194,305 people have been displaced by heavy rains and flooding. Critical infrastructure has also been affected, including roads, bridges, dams, and health facilities. Schools have been ordered to close.

In Nairobi County, the home of Kenya's capital, an estimated 147,061 people are affected and 20,968 families displaced by the heavy rainfall. The majority of deaths have happened in the slums of Mathare and Kibera, where residents have accused the government of William Ruto of neglecting them.

One resident in Mathare told *Al Jazeera*, "The government says they deployed the military and the national youth service and they are stepping up search and rescue missions, but where are they? It has been a week, and where are they? I have not seen anyone here in Mathare. Not one person from the government has come to help us".

In the most tragic single event, a mudslide in Mai Mahiu claimed the lives of 71 people after water blew through a blocked river tunnel under a railway line in Nakuru County, causing a flash flood, as many of the victims lay at home sleeping.

Human Rights Watch published findings that working-

class neighborhoods and the poorest areas have been most severely impacted by the floods due to "less solid structures, congestion and poor sanitation infrastructure".

The floods are also having a devastating impact on agriculture, already affected by several years of drought. Hunger is now looming. According to the Kenya Red Cross Society, at least 8,565 livestock have been lost and 36,344 acres of croplands damaged.

There is now a risk of disease outbreaks. Cholera, spreading from contaminated water supplies, has been detected in 34 people. Stagnant water, creating breeding grounds for mosquitoes, is expected to increase the number of malaria cases.

In neighboring Tanzania, floods claimed the lives of at least 155 people and injured 236 others. More than 200,000 people and 51,000 households were affected. Ferry services between Tanzania's capital, Dar es Salaam, and Zanzibar were suspended as Cyclone Hidaya approached with maximum winds of 120kph.

In Burundi, torrential rains have affected more than 179,200 people and displaced 31,200 since the start of the year. In a country already suffering high levels of food insecurity, it is estimated that 10 per cent of the country's crop area for the 2024 agricultural season has been affected.

In Rwanda, heavy rains and floods killed 14 people, and damaged roads and bridges. In Somalia, more than 127,000 people have been affected, with 8,376 displaced and 7 children killed.

The severity of the latest record rainfall and flooding is another demonstration of the destructiveness of capitalist-induced 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.

East Africa is one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change, with extreme weather events growing increasingly common and intense, including severe droughts, rains and floods. Since late 2020, the region has suffered its worst drought in 40 years.

The fight against climate change is fundamentally a class question. Invariably, across the region and the globe, it is the poorest layers of the population—whether workers, pastoralists, small farmers and/or people living in informal settlements—who suffer most from these frequent climate-related catastrophes.

On the other side, the wealthy layers live in the affluent neighborhoods of Nairobi, Kigali, Dar es Salaam, Mogadishu and Bujumbura, away from flood-prone areas and with access to generators and good sewage systems. They drive SUVs that skim over badly damaged roads and potholes, can work remotely using laptops, and can afford highly inflated food prices and store them in their pantries. If affected by viruses, they can access top private health facilities.

Rooted in these affluent layers, politicians cynically urge the poor to pray their way out of the crisis. The Ruto government has made a call for prayers to address the flood situation, a year after Ruto invoked God to dismiss the probability of extreme rains and refused to make any preparations while ruthlessly imposing IMF-dictated tax hikes and subsidy cuts and violently crushing anti-austerity protests, claiming the lives of over 70 protestors.

The fight to throw off imperialist exploitation is inextricably bound up with the struggle against this venal oligarchy that function as the local representatives of the imperialist powers and global corporations.

Less than 0.1 percent of the population in Kenya (8,300 people) own more wealth than the bottom 99.9 percent (more than 44 million people). That 0.1 percent includes Ruto, the current opposition leader Raila Odinga and former President Uhuru Kenyatta. The country has one of the fastest growing echelons of the super-rich anywhere in the world.

Tanzania is home to Mohammed Dewji, with a portfolio of \$1.77 billion, the 13th richest person in Africa. He is the CEO of METL, a conglomerate founded by his father in the 1970s. He is part of an elite that has enriched itself in sectors such as energy, agriculture, telecommunications, and Fast Moving Consumer Goods.

Rwanda has been run for three decades by the Western-backed dictator Paul Kagame, with a personal net worth of at least \$500 million. He and his family members control the majority of the Rwandan economy through a

holding company called Crystal Ventures.

This ill-gotten wealth must be expropriated and directed towards meeting urgent human needs, including measures for anticipating, mitigating, and responding to extreme weather events such as heavy rains and floods.

Infrastructure must be made capable of withstanding severe weather conditions and advanced satellite technology and geographical information used to predict high levels of flooding. Drainage systems must be maintained and enhanced, sand dams and rainwater harvesting systems constructed, and projects launched to restore and conserve wetlands, which serve as natural water absorbers. Planning regulations must be tightened and stringently enforced to prevent construction in flood-prone zones and safeguard natural buffers like forests and grasslands.

But such crisis measures can only achieve their ends to the degree that they are tied in with a global struggle against capitalism by the working class—especially in the imperialist centres where the global corporations plan their pillage of the planet—that would facilitate a rapid transfer of resources and technology to the oppressed countries.

Funding the fight against the climate crisis also means stopping the flow of resources to military spending, rapidly accelerating as the major imperialist powers prepare for conflict on a scale not seen since 1945 and drag with them their former colonies run by their proxies. Ruto is increasing Kenya's ties with the US, whose drive to oppose the rise of China across the African continent threatens to plunge the whole region into an arms race and war.

Over the weekend, as the country drowned in floods, Nairobi announced it was acquiring a high-tech missile defense system from the genocidal regime of Israel using a \$1 billion loan from Tel Aviv. Nairobi claims growing security threats in the Gulf of Aden from Al-Shabaab in Somalia—which has no aircraft—and the Houthis in Yemen, who have a single fighter jet—an ancient F-5.

Defence spending in the country has grown by 38 percent from 2021 to 2024, from \$925 million to \$1.2 billion.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact