

# Glacier collapse in Blatten, Switzerland—A portent of an ecological catastrophe

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On May 28, a mass of rock, ice, mud and water crashed down on and buried the mountain village of Blatten in the Swiss canton of Valais. Only a few houses remained standing, and these are now flooded by a pool of water that has formed behind the debris.

The next disaster is already looming. Experts fear that mudslides will bury lower-lying areas when the water pool overflows and the water breaks through the debris. Two smaller hamlets have therefore been evacuated.

So far, there has been only one casualty, as the disaster was predicted and Blatten had been evacuated days earlier. A 64-year-old man, who is believed to have returned to search for lost sheep, has been missing since then. It is feared that he lies buried under the rubble, untraceable.

Blatten, located in the upper part of the Lötschental, a side valley of the Rhone, was a lively, modern village with around 300 inhabitants. Many people who grew up in the region and work in the lower Rhone Valley settled there with their families. There were also two hotels in the picturesque village. Now they are completely destroyed.

The disaster was triggered by persistent rockfalls on the Kleines Nesthorn, which rises to a height of 3,300 meters (10,827 feet) above Blatten. Over the course of two weeks, several million cubic meters of rock accumulated on the Birch Glacier below, which began to move under the weight of the debris and eventually broke off completely. Rock and ice plunged into the depths at breakneck speed. The resulting tremors were felt throughout Switzerland.

Geologists had observed the development and even anticipated a larger rockfall from the Kleines Nesthorn than actually occurred. Nevertheless, the disaster corresponded to their worst case scenario. There had never been such a combination of ice and rock falls

before.

Rockfalls occur repeatedly in the Alps, whose landscape has been shaped by 35 million years of erosion. But recently, such events have become more frequent, taking on greater proportions, and also affecting densely populated areas.

In 1991, for example, a rockslide near Randa in the Mattertal valley opposite buried the busy railway line and road to Zermatt, where up to 40,000 tourists stay every day. At 30 million cubic meters (1,059.4 million cubic feet), the amount of debris was even slightly more than in Blatten. It was only by chance that no one was killed at the time.

Even though the exact circumstances vary from case to case, it is undeniable that the increase in disasters in the Alps is due to the growing climate crisis. The sensitive ecosystem of the Alpine region, which spans several countries and provides livelihoods and recreation for millions of people, is threatened with destruction by climate change, rendering the region uninhabitable.

The Alps are just one region threatened by global climate change. Similar developments are taking place in other mountain ranges, such as the Himalayas. In coastal regions, rising sea levels are threatening the livelihoods of up to a billion people. Droughts and floods are destroying crops worldwide. In countries such as the US, hurricanes and tornadoes are becoming increasingly severe.

These natural disasters are not local or regional phenomena but the result of a global development: climate change. They can only be solved on a global scale.

Several factors play a role in the Alps and other mountain regions:

- Global warming not only leads to the rapid melting

of glaciers, the most important water reservoirs, but also causes the permafrost, the permanently frozen ground that holds the rock together at high altitudes, to melt. The consequences are more frequent rockfalls, debris flows (mudslides) and the release of pollutants. The thawing of the permafrost is also likely to have played a role in the rockfalls on the Kleines Nesthorn.

- Heat, drought and bark beetles weaken and destroy mountain forests, which protect the mountains from erosion and people and infrastructure from avalanches and rockfalls.

- Warmer air and water temperatures result in extreme storms that turn mountain streams into raging torrents that sweep away trees, roads and houses. The higher the temperature, the more water the air can absorb. The Adriatic and Mediterranean seas, where clouds gather before raining over the Alps, reached water temperatures of 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit) last summer. This led to devastating rainfall in many Alpine regions.

These factors are as well known and researched as the effects of climate change on sea levels. The Swiss government maintains a Federal Office for Civil Protection, which deals with disaster and emergency management and produces detailed risk analyses.

But pollution and climate change continue unabated. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) has calculated that the global average temperature is likely to be 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels over the next five years. This means that the maximum set by the Paris Climate Conference in 2015 has already been reached, and temperature increases continue unabated.

In recent years, all governments have abandoned their climate targets. The COP (Conference of the Parties) climate summits have turned into trade fairs for fossil fuels. The last one took place in Baku, the center of Azerbaijan's oil industry. In the escalating global trade war, all governments are relying on fossil fuels to cut costs.

In the US, which accounts for 4.3 percent of the world's population but emits 13 percent of global greenhouse gases, a criminal gang of climate deniers is in power, sacrificing all social needs to the enrichment of the super-rich oligarchs. Germany's new government is putting massive pressure on the European Union to raise the emission limits for cars

that have already been decided. Everywhere, environmental protection is giving way to the profit demands of the rich.

The Swiss government, which owes a considerable part of its wealth to the management of large fortunes and the activities of global corporations, such as Nestlé, Roche, Novartis and Glencore, will not oppose profiteering at the expense of the environment.

The scientific knowledge and technical prerequisites for solving the climate crisis are available, but they run up against the profit interests of those in power. Capitalist society is like a madman staggering toward the abyss with his eyes closed. It has only one answer to all social problems: war, dictatorship, social spending cuts, and environmental destruction. It is high time to put an end to it.

Preserving the environment—like the fight against war, fascism and poverty—requires the building of a socialist movement that unites the international working class and fights for the overthrow of capitalism.



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