

Chinese floods displace millions

Peter Symonds
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Severe flooding along China's Yangtze River is rapidly becoming a human tragedy of gigantic proportions. Millions of people have been driven from their homes by the floodwaters and many more are threatened with inundation if dykes and levees protecting cities and towns along the river give way. Wuhan, a major industrial city with a population of more than seven million people, is in imminent danger.

Reports from the flood stricken areas are limited. Foreign news teams have been barred from the area. According to official Chinese reports, more than 2,000 people have died since the beginning of the rainy season in June--mostly in landslides and mudflows. An estimated five million homes have been destroyed and 14 million people have fled to safer ground.

Many of the homeless are living in makeshift conditions relying for their survival on the limited government ration of 500g of rice a day. Officials have already warned of the dangers of a major outbreak of cholera or other diseases due to the lack of clean drinking water and adequate medical supplies.

There is every reason to believe that the death toll may be much higher than official figures. A number of dykes have already burst inundating towns and villages. A Hong Kong based dissident group reported that more than 1,000 Chinese soldiers and civilians were missing after a dyke burst on August 1 in Jiuya county, about 70 km upstream from Wuhan.

Last week an estimated 40,000 people were stranded by floodwaters in the city of Jiujiang in the eastern Jiangxi province after the river broke a levee, engulfing a four square kilometre area. One journalist reported seeing 'dead bodies everywhere, floating and piled up'. Some 30,000 people were working to shore up the breach with thousands of tonnes of stone. Eight boats were sunk to try to plug a gap some 40 metres across.

A state of emergency was declared last week in Hubei Province where the flood has broken through more than

100 separate embankments. According to the official New China news agency, the Yangtze is threatening to break its banks in 3,200 places, of which 1,800 were possible 'major' breaches.

Chinese authorities have evacuated 330,000 people, sometimes forcibly, from a huge tract of rural land known as the Jiangjiang diversion area. Engineers are preparing to dynamite levees and open floodgates in the area to divert the raging floodwaters and safeguard cities further downstream. Already soldiers at other points along the river have dynamited a number of smaller, secondary dykes or simply allowed them to collapse in order to safeguard urban areas.

The scope of the flooding is staggering. According to government sources, more than 240 million people--more than the total population of the United States--have been affected either directly or indirectly by the flooding. The floods are the worst since the disastrous flooding in 1954, which claimed the lives of 30,000 people.

The immediate cause is an early and heavy start to the rainy season. In the Yellow River region, another 2.5 million residents have been put on alert to fight possible flooding. The danger is far from over as meteorologists predict between five and seven typhoons will hit China in the next three months, intensifying the danger of flooding, particularly in coastal areas.

Millions of Chinese soldiers and civilians have been mobilised along the Yangtze River to try to shore up dykes and levees, to evacuate flooded areas and to provide rudimentary food and shelter. Working in primitive conditions and little equipment, many have risked their lives attempting to save cities, towns and villages. Some have died as a result.

But already questions are being asked about the man-made causes of the flooding. Even the existing limited flood prevention measures have been undermined by

the drive by the Stalinist bureaucracy in Beijing towards privatisation and a market economy. Isolated TV reports have shown angry villagers, who have been forced to leave flooded areas, condemning local bureaucrats for stealing funds provided for the maintenance of levees and dykes.

Construction began in late 1994 on the massive Three Gorges dam across the Yangtze River--the largest dam in the world. The Beijing bureaucracy has pressed ahead with the project despite widespread opposition, claiming that it will tame the river and end the danger of flooding. At least one million people will be forcibly relocated from the area behind the dam wall, which is due for its completion in 2009. The reservoir is expected to flood some 19 counties.

Environmentalists and other opponents of the dam point out, however, that the huge cost of the project has resulted in money being siphoned off from much needed work on the maintenance of flood levees along the river. 'Money that should have gone into flood control is being diverted into the dam itself. The dykes and embankments need a huge amount of maintenance that they are not getting,' commented Paddy McCully, campaigns director for the International Rivers Network.

Another major factor in the current flooding is the silting up of the Yangtze River itself. Poor farming techniques, deforestation and poor land management have resulted in huge quantities of topsoil being washed away into the river system. By raising the level of the riverbed, the silting makes the river system more prone to flooding.

In an interview reported in the *Australian* newspaper, Dr Sam Portch, vice-president of the China and India program at the Potash and Phosphate Institute explained: 'In Wuhan, they had 19 inches of rain in just 54 hours--that would cause flooding in any place, but the water should be dispersing in a couple of days. But when the river is full of soil, there is no place for the water to go.'

Portsch said that in one area of Yunnan, about 200 tonnes of topsoil disappears into the local river every year. By multiplying the effect over the entire catchment, experts estimate that 700 million tonnes of mud and sand, plus 100 million tonnes of pebbles are washed downstream every year. According to one official, silting will render the Three Gorges Dam

useless for electricity production in about 40 years.

A report in the *Baokan Wencai* newspaper in coastal Fujian province pointed the finger at the unfettered operation of construction and other businesses in China--private and government-run. A review by local officials pronounced that flood damage 'cannot be totally blamed on nature. Floods which should occur once every 10 years under natural conditions, in Nanping have become annual affairs.' The article said the causes included the dumping of construction waste from railway, dam and road projects into waterways.

Nearly 50 years after the Chinese Stalinists took power, floods along the Yangtze are causing the same death and devastation as in imperial China and bureaucrats adopt the same pragmatic methods as their imperial predecessors. As a number of Chinese scholars have noted, the old Chinese emperors, with callous indifference for the lives of their subjects, used to open up the dykes in rural areas to save their palaces in the cities.

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