

Official indifference as South Asia floods affect 40 million people

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Millions of people across the Indian subcontinent have been affected by what are considered to be the worst floods in 15 years. According to the latest figures, around 40 million people are homeless and at least 1,300 people have been killed. Officials have admitted that the final death toll could be much higher, with rescue and relief measures still not reaching some areas. Water-borne diseases are also expected to cause many more fatalities.

By July 28, Associated Press estimated that 768 had died in India, 394 in Bangladesh, 102 in Nepal, 16 in Afghanistan, 5 in Pakistan, and 3 in Bhutan. Causes of death included drowning, diarrhea and other diseases, electrocution, landslides, lightning, collapsing homes and snakebites. Diarrhea caused by dirty drinking water has already killed 46 people and afflicted about 80,000 in Bangladesh, according to the government's Health Directorate.

The worst-affected areas are Bihar, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Assam and Tripura in India; Rangpur, Kurigram, Gaibandha, Sylhet and Bogra in Bangladesh; Nepal's capital city Katmandu; and the northwest Mardan District in Pakistan. In many places, the region's swollen main rivers—the Brahmaputra, Ganges and Meghna—have overflowed and washed away villages, sometimes breaking embankments. The hardest hit have been the urban and rural poor who are often forced to live on flood-prone land.

Landslides have cut the northeastern Indian states, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura, from the rest of the country. In Assam, 22 out of 24 districts are inundated. Chief Minister Gogoi estimated that 10 billion rupees (\$US200 million) worth of damage had been done to the state's infrastructure. Around half of Guwahati, the capital of Assam, is submerged. Officially, 131 people have been killed and 10 million made homeless. In the neighbouring state, Arunachal Pradesh, the BBC reported "bridges, embankments and other facilities collapsing as more and more villages go under water".

The north Indian state of Bihar is severely affected by floods, with 11 million homeless and more than 520 deaths. The BBC reported on July 18: "Survivors in Bihar are still clinging to rooftops, and have been without much food for nearly a week." According to government estimates, 238,000 houses have been damaged and 150 million rupees worth of crops destroyed. This

will have disastrous consequences in the coming months for small farmers and other poor residents.

In Bangladesh, 41 of country's 64 districts have been affected, with 30 million people stranded or homeless out of the country's 140 million population. The Relief Ministry estimates that a million acres of crops, including rice paddies, have been destroyed. Cattle, fishing boats and equipment have been washed away. Schools and businesses have been closed. Electricity and telephone connections have been severely disrupted. A Bangladeshi newspaper, the *Daily Star*, reported on July 12: "Rail links between northern and northeastern districts and the capital remained cut-off for the fourth day yesterday."

Much of the capital Dhaka is under water. The British-based *Guardian* reported that shanty towns in low-lying areas were flooded, with residents left floundering in filth from the city's failed sewage system. "Holding their belongings over their heads, residents of the Mugdapara district waded through the waist-deep floodwaters, which had mixed with sewage and turned blackish and foul-smelling."

Bangladesh's biggest port Chittagong is also flooded. The country's lone hydroelectric dam on the Karnaphuli River in Kaptai was under threat, its plant manager stated. In the Bogra district, 250 km northwest of Dhaka, a dam burst on the Jamuna River, sweeping away 60 people, including 4 children, on July 16.

A 35-year-old mother of two told the AFP news service: "We were sleeping when the water came and suddenly we were surrounded. We couldn't save anything—we just saved our lives by swimming to this road." She described the miserable conditions they now face without food or other relief supplies. "We have to sleep in the open because we have nothing, no food, no water, no blankets, no shelter." Ramisa Begum, 30, a widow with three children told the *International Herald Tribune*: "I don't mind going hungry, but I can't see my children going without food."

Throughout the affected areas across the subcontinent, people have been forced to take shelter in schools, on river embankments, in trees, and on rooftops, sometimes without tents, getting soaked. Millions lack food, drinking water and medicine, because of the failure of governments to provide

basic supplies.

This desperate situation is the result of decades of indifference by the governments of the region and the lack of any significant international effort to plan adequate relief measures, let alone address the underlying causes of the flooding. Every year the monsoons arrive, swelling the rivers of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna, one of the world's largest river basins, and spilling over into low-lying areas. Bangladesh, which is a river delta country, with most of its land mass—about 80 percent—situated in lowlands less than 10 metres above sea level, is particularly vulnerable.

Yet each year politicians and officials wring their hands over another “natural calamity”, hand out a pittance in aid to the suffering millions and make a series of false promises that measures will be taken to ameliorate the situation in the future. In Bangladesh, for instance, the Khowai River project in the flood-prone Habiganj district, was meant to provide flood protection embankments. Started in 1976, it was supposed to be completed by 1984, but still remains unfinished after 28 years.

Last year, 1,500 people died across South Asia during the monsoons, which lasted from mid-June to mid-October. Nothing has been done to ensure the tragedy this year will be any different.

The floods have once again exposed the inadequacy of government evacuation plans and programs for providing basic accommodation, food, clean water and medicine to hundreds of thousands of refugees. Starvation and epidemic outbreaks have started to spread, with doctors in Dhaka alone treating 500 to 600 patients, mostly children, each day for diarrhea-related diseases.

In the Indian state of Bihar, the government has announced that army helicopters have airdropped about 226 tonnes of food. But these relief operations are so meagre that food riots erupted in the Darbhanga district. Reuters reported: “Angry villagers raided grain warehouses of the state-owned Food Corporation of India in the Madhubani district on Friday [July 16]”, while holding a senior civil servant captive for a while, complaining of a snarl-up in aid distribution.

The Indian central government has given the Assam state government 1.81 billion rupees and deployed army and air force personnel for rescue operations, including airdrops of food packets in flood-hit areas. But victims have denounced the limited character of the relief measures. One woman on the outskirts of Assam's capital Guwahati told the *Hindu*: “For the last three days, we have been starving and have not received anything from the government.” She added: “My children are crying in hunger”.

Visiting Assam, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh pledged to set up a panel to find a lasting solution to the floods. But there is little reason to believe that years of neglect will change. Just few days before Singh's visit, Assam's Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi appealed for international assistance. “The state is not adequately equipped to handle the rescue and

relief operations,” he declared. It is no different in any country in the region.

The Nepal government said relief material worth 4.2 million rupees had been distributed in the affected areas. Yet, reports emerged of angry people rallying in protest against the government's delay in providing supplies and the sheer insufficiency of the effort. Reuters quoted one Nepali: “There is a short supply of food and medicines in flood-affected areas and people are starving.”

Bangladesh's Ministry of Food and Disaster Management reported it had distributed 2,650 metric tonnes of rice and 13,000 tins of biscuits, after allocating \$US77,800 for relief assistance and \$66,200 for housing assistance. But this is completely dwarfed by the magnitude of the disaster. Floods have engulfed two-thirds of the country, displacing 1.3 million people. Villagers have pitched tents on highways or mud embankments with their families and cattle. In Dhaka some shelters have flooded and 10,000 people are living in a soccer stadium.

Scientific and technical specialists have pointed to a number of factors that are causing the annual floods in South Asia to worsen. One of the consequences of rapidly expanding urban development, much of it completely unplanned, is the creation of large areas of concrete, stone and paving that collect and channel water but without any proper drainage. As Hong Kong Baptist University meteorologist Kenneth Wong bluntly explained: “If they don't have adequate storm run-off drainage, then flooding occurs.”

For a number of years, experts have been warning of the dangers of uncontrolled deforestation in the catchment areas that feed the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system. These include parts of northern India, China, Nepal and Bhutan. The topsoil is stripped from bare mountainsides and carried downstream, eventually to be deposited on riverbeds, especially in Bangladesh. Speaking at Dhaka University on July 21, French scholar Christian France-Larord warned of more devastating floods in the future, due to deforestation and industrialisation.

The reasons for the flooding are largely known. Previously large-scale plans have even been drawn up to prevent or ameliorate the impact of the annual deluge. What is completely lacking, however, is the necessary cooperation between the various governments of the region and the finance to implement the proposals. The root cause of this recurring disaster lies in the anarchy of the profit system and the artificial division of the region into competing nation-states, all of which precludes any rational, scientific and planned approach to the problem.



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