

Immediate flood catastrophe averted in China, but dangers remain

By James Conachy
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According to government and aid agency reports, the efforts of hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers and soldiers have thus far prevented catastrophic flooding around Lake Dongting in China's central Hunan province and further down the Yangtze River.

After weeks of heavy rainfall, a state of emergency was declared across Hunan on August 21, as torrents of water coursed into the lake from the upper reaches of the Yangtze and from two other rivers, the Zishui and Xiangliang. According to the state-run Xinhua news agency, more than 940,000 workers and farmers, 100,000 paramilitary police and 15,000 soldiers were deployed around the clock to reinforce and raise the height of the network of dikes and levees that protect over 10 million people.

Before the water level began to drop on the weekend, it reached nearly three metres, or 10 feet, above the accepted danger mark. Over 250,000 people in low-lying land were ordered to abandon their homes. Authorities are believed to be still considering breaking dikes and allowing the lake to encroach into the evacuated areas if there is more heavy rainfall.

While the majority of the population around Dongting was spared inundation, the impact has been disastrous for many communities. At least 27,000 houses and some 92,000 hectares of crops were lost, with another 67,000 houses and 268,000 hectares damaged. Some 339 villages and eight major cities were threatened. Across Hunan province, 200 people have died in the floods and eight million people have been affected to some extent. Nationally, at least 1,300 people have died this wet season in floods, landslides or typhoons.

Over the course of this week, states of emergency have been declared downstream from Dongting and efforts undertaken to avert any flooding of the major

cities of Changsa and Wuhan, in Hubei province. In Changsa, officials have reported that 9,000 homes were flooded and 33,000 people are now homeless. While the authorities in Wuhan celebrated the fact that the city's dikes withstood the waters, a Reuters report noted the fate of hundreds of poor fishermen and itinerant workers whose shantytowns along the riverbanks were washed away. A local resident told the journalists: "It's this way every year around July and August, even when there's less rain. They use the homes when the waters are low and go elsewhere when the waters rise."

With the Yangtze flood crest having now passed through those areas, the focus of flood prevention is turning to areas further east around Lake Poyang. In the areas already affected, thousands of conscripted workers and troops are being kept on standby in the event of more heavy rain in the upper reaches of the Yangtze. With the lakes and rivers still at dangerous levels, a new crisis situation could rapidly develop.

The underlying cause of the crisis is not the heavy rain, however. As Dai Qing, a Beijing-based environmental activist, told the Agence France Presse this week: "Flooding is a natural occurrence, just like forest fires. But as for how devastating the flood damage is, that has to do with the workings of human beings. The severe flooding in the Dongting Lake area is a direct result of deforestation and excessive farming of riverbeds. The banks of the rivers flowing onto Dongting Lake used to be full of trees, which helped prevent soil erosion and severe flooding."

Lake Dongting is the first major catchment area of the Yangtze and is one of the main natural defences against flooding for the tens of millions of people living along the river. Uncontrolled land reclamation, deforestation and silting, particularly over the past 40

years, have caused the lake's water area to shrink to just 3,900 square kilometres, compared with 6,200 square kilometres 150 years ago.

The lake's shrinkage not only threatens the cities and towns surrounding it with regular flooding, but also allows vast water crests to flow further down the Yangtze to endanger cities from Wuhan to the coastal metropolis of Shanghai. In 1998, despite the fact that rainfall did not reach historical highs, Dongting Lake reached an unprecedented water level of 35.4 metres. It overflowed in numerous places and was a major factor in the worst floods in China since 1954. Over 4,000 lives were lost and hundreds of farming communities were laid waste.

The outrage felt toward the Beijing regime after the 1998 floods has been heightened over the past four years by the callous and arbitrary manner in which it has implemented flood prevention measures. As many as 3.3 million peasants were simply ordered to re-locate from 5,900 square kilometres of reclaimed land around Lake Dongting and along the Yangtze, and local authorities were instructed to allow water to engulf the area in future floods. Information has filtered out that the affected communities were provided next to no compensation and in some cases, were simply left at the mercy of floods. The *New York Times* referred this month to reports from the Dongting region that numbers of families were placed in housing on higher ground but left to farm land that is now designated as a flood zone. As the lake rose, they lost their entire crops.

Various branches of the Chinese government claim to have spent \$12 billion on repairing flood damage, reforestation and reinforcing and constructing dikes. The burden of this work, however, has fallen directly on the peasantry in the form of compulsory labour. In many Yangtze villages, peasants have been providing as many as 20 days of unpaid labour to local authorities while better-off layers escaped the work by paying a monetary equivalent. In other areas, social unrest has erupted over the attempt of local authorities to make the peasants pay for the work through taxes, as well as do it. In an internationally publicised incident in April 2001, farmers in Yuntang village in Jiangxi province, to the east of Hunan, rioted against attempts to charge them for the rebuilding of flood-ruined rice terraces.

For years, the propaganda departments in Beijing have promoted the massive Three Gorges Dam, being

built in the upper reaches of the Yangtze, as the long-term solution to flooding. The main objective of the project, begun in 1979, was to generate electricity for industry, not prevent floods. Questions over the dam's ability to improve management of the Yangtze have been ignored. After the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, a number of its main critics were imprisoned.

Since work began in 1993, the Three Gorges Dam has been plagued by allegations of flawed plans, engineering faults and wholesale corruption. As many as 1.3 million people living in the areas to be flooded by the dam have been or are in the process of being forcibly re-located from their homes, without adequate compensation or job retraining. It is not due to be completed until 2009 and is officially estimated to cost \$US25 billion. Unofficial sources predict the real figure will be more like \$75 billion. Even as the costs blow out, doubts continue to be raised that it will have any serious impact on flooding.

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