

At least 1,000 killed in Indian floods and landslides

By Sampath Perera
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Heavy rains in northern parts of India over the past week have triggered massive flash floods and landslides, creating a major disaster. Worst hit is the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, where more than 1,000 people are thought to have died. Thousands more are missing and tens of thousands are stranded in mountainous areas, in what has been called a “Himalayan tsunami.”

Uttarakhand’s infrastructure has been devastated. Landslides and floods have washed away an estimated 500 roads and 200 bridges, cutting communication networks. Estimates vary but up to 40,000 people are believed to be stranded in 100 remote towns and villages. They have little or no supplies of food, drinking water and medical assistance. Victims accused the state and central governments of ignoring their plight.

An unusually intense three-day fusion of two weather systems—monsoon rains advancing toward the west and westerly winds that arrived unexpectedly—resulted in the heaviest deluge in nearly 80 years, according to India’s Meteorological Department. Seventeen deaths were reported in the state of Uttar Pradesh, but the damage was far greater in economically backward Uttarakhand.

Further heavy rains are forecast for today, further hampering rescue and relief operations. The army, which has been placed in command, suspended evacuations by air yesterday afternoon after thick fog descended. Rescue teams are erecting makeshift bridges to connect areas that remain cut off but few significant advances have been made in the worst-affected area—40,000 square kilometres of rough terrain, an area larger than the US state of Maryland. Uttarakhand Chief Minister Vijay Bahuguna said 15 more days were needed to move out flood victims. So

far 80,000 people have been evacuated, according to the army.

Without immediate assistance, hopes for survival will soon run out for many of those affected. The vast majority are visitors from distant states who hardly know the area or how to survive in a Himalayan terrain, much less amid a disaster of this magnitude. Uttarakhand has a population of more than 10 million, but receives about 30 million visitors annually. Most are pilgrims who arrive between May and November to visit Hindu shrines.

Helicopters have dropped dry rations in some places. An indication that many people have been without food for days was an incident in which two men tragically died, falling down a mountain, as they desperately tried to catch airdropped food packets.

Photographs in the local and global media showed destruction on a colossal scale. Gushing mud water streams still raged in towns and villages, while many areas remain inundated. Floods have left several feet of debris in other areas. The force of the water was enough to topple or severely damage multi-story buildings.

A priest at Kedarnath temple told the *New York Times*: “Suddenly a deafening noise shook everything. It felt like an earthquake. Within minutes, a river of black water and big stones followed us into the temple.” Another victim told the *Hindu* that what he saw would haunt him for a lifetime. “Bodies were scattered all over and their relatives were too exhausted to even cry over them,” he said.

Those who were able to trek through steep rocky hills and river valleys to safety reported dead bodies lying along the paths. There are also accounts of groups of people entering mountain forests to escape the floods, only to be stranded in unknown locations without

adequate food or clothing.

The entire rescue operation has been inadequate. “Many of those affected by the floods are accusing the government of neglect,” reported the BBC, whose correspondent described protest demonstrations outside government offices. *Aljazeera* reported complaints “that the government was taking too long to evacuate the survivors, with small helicopters bringing in four to five people at a time.”

Following mounting condemnation, the government belatedly stepped up the rescue mission. Russian-built MI-26 helicopters that can carry about 150 passengers were finally deployed on Saturday. The central government’s Home Affairs Minister Sushilkumar Shinde admitted on Saturday there was a “lack of coordination between government agencies engaged in rescue operations.” Uttarakhand’s Chief Minister, however, denied any delay. He insisted: “The magnitude of the calamity is so huge that not even the government of India has a force which can handle such a situation.”

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and ruling Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi conducted an “aerial survey” of the region on Wednesday. Describing the situation as “distressing,” Singh later offered 200,000 rupees (\$3,400) to the families of the dead and 50,000 rupees for the injured, while announcing 10 billion rupees (\$167 million) in disaster relief for Uttarakhand. These promises are simply an attempt to deflect criticism.

Other reports reveal the government’s responsibility for the conditions that led to the high death toll. The Comptroller and Auditor General warned in April that the state had no meaningful disaster management plan. Some 44 percent of emergency operation posts remained vacant, despite the 2008 Geological Survey of India identifying 101 villages as “vulnerable.”

Moreover, the sheer magnitude of the disaster is the result of profit-driven economic processes. Road and hotel construction, aiming at boosting tourism, continues in haste and without proper planning. Since 2000, seven new dams have been built, and work is in progress in nine more, while plans exist for another 19. These involve the continuous blasting of hills, disturbing the rock structure of the already fragile Himalayan mountain system.

Experts cited in the *Hindu* pointed to three major

flash floods since 2005, compared to just one in the previous 27 years. When “bumper-to-bumper dams are built, the impact multiplies manifold,” the article stated.

Global warming is a further contributing factor. Bill Hare, visiting professor at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, told the BBC that while global warming could not be said to be directly behind the disaster, “these kinds of events, as a general statement, will be occurring more often in the future and will be more damaging as the globe warms.”

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