

Floods inundate Western Ukraine amid renewed spike in COVID-19 cases

By Jason Melanovski
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Extensive torrential rains have led to the destruction of dams, bridges, villages and roads throughout western Ukraine and left at least three dead.

While the downfall of rain ended on June 24, 70 towns and villages remain flooded, primarily in the Ivano-Frankivsk and Ternopil regions in the western part of the country. At its worst, over 5,000 houses and more than 200 villages were inundated with water.

While the Ukrainian government blamed the origins of the floods on the extraordinary amount of rain, 70 percent of an entire month's average in just two days, several reports have pointed to illegal logging and soil erosion in the nearby Carpathian Forest at the behest of international firms, such as furniture chain Ikea, which have led to the floods.

Immediately following the floods, Earthsight, an environmental group based in the United Kingdom, released a report which found that, "Ikea is selling beach chairs made from wood which was illegally felled in the forests of the Ukrainian Carpathians." The report also noted that illegal logging had continued during the COVID-19 lockdown throughout April.

As a result of the deforestation, when heavy rains hit the Carpathian Mountains, floods, mudslides and the destruction of bridges, roads and other infrastructure are now much more common.

According to the report, the illegal logging has been taking place for years under various Ukrainian governments and with their full knowledge and assistance. Most recently, the head of one Carpathian region's forestry agency was fired after accepting bribes in an illegal logging scam.

Rather than improving under the current administration of President Volodymyr Zelensky, who campaigned on a phony "anti-corruption" platform, one experienced lumberjack in the region stated that

state-sanctioned illegal logging in the country had "never been worse."

The Zelensky government has denied any link between the floods and exploitative deforestation, stating that "no amount of trees" could have stopped the floods.

In response to the floods, the United States, which recently approved a \$250 million military aid package to Ukraine, announced it was sending a paltry \$100,000 in humanitarian assistance.

The floods have taken place in the very same regions where the country has been hardest hit by the coronavirus outbreak, further impoverishing some of the poorer regions of what is already Europe's poorest country.

In one instance, in the city of Halych, a hospital was evacuated, but 43 COVID-19 patients were left so as to prevent the spreading of the virus.

The western regions of Ukraine have experienced a series of rapid COVID-19 outbreaks in part due to the large number of migrant workers who returned to the region primarily from Poland just prior to the closing of the country's borders. Approximately 2 million Ukrainian workers returned home from across Europe in order to avoid the risk of being stranded abroad with no jobs or social or legal protections. Upon entering the country, they were forced to pass through crowded checkpoints where social distancing was practically impossible.

In June, Ukraine experienced a renewed surge of cases, hitting almost 45,000, with 1,173 deaths. Among those infected are at least 3,270 children and 6,765 medical workers.

The Ministry of Health announced this week that the rate of COVID-19 hospitalizations had doubled over the past month from 749 a week to 1,410 a week, along

with a similar doubling in the number of pneumonia cases from 2,572 to 4,705 cases. One in five patients in Ukrainian hospitals is now infected with COVID-19. Earlier this month, President Zelensky's wife tested positive for the virus. Zelensky has now publicly stated that the country had to prepare for a "second wave."

The World Health Organization (WHO) counts Ukraine among one of 11 countries in Europe and Asia where there has been a "very significant resurgence" of the virus. Almost all of these countries are in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The director of the European department of the World Health Organization (WHO), Hans Henri Kluge, warned in an interview with the BBC that "if left unchecked [this resurgence of COVID-19] will push health systems to the brink once again."

The floods and the spread of the virus are fueling an already devastating social crisis. Even before the pandemic began, about 60 percent of the Ukrainian population were living beneath the subsistence minimum. The economist Viktor Skarshevsky estimated in an interview with Kontrakty.ua that, due to the economic fallout of the coronavirus crisis, 3 million to 3.5 million people are now unemployed, the equivalent of 15 to 17 percent of the working age population.

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