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Environment

2007 - Year of Climate Change Catastrophe

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[IMG/jpg/chinafloods34.jpg]

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Since this article was written the idea of accelerating disasters as a result of climate change has been rapidly confirmed by another flooding disaster in Bangladesh, in which at least 3000 people have died, and another round of brush fires in California, this time around Malibu.

Further detailed evidence of this trend was provided by Oxfam, the British charity, who on November 25 published a report detailing a four-fold increase in disasters attributable to extreme weather in the last 20 years. From an average of 120 disasters a year in the early 1980s, there are now as many as 500, with Oxfam attributing the rise to unpredictable weather conditions cause by global warming. "This year we have seen floods in South Asia, across the breadth of Africa and Mexico that have affected more than 250 million people," said Oxfam's director Barbara Stocking. "This is no freak year. It follows a pattern of more frequent, more erratic, more unpredictable and more extreme weather events that are affecting more people. The number of people affected by disasters has risen by 68 percent, from an average of 174 million a year between 1985 to 1994 to 254 million a year between 1995 to 2004. "Action is needed now to prepare for more disasters otherwise humanitarian assistance will be overwhelmed and recent advances in human development will go into reverse," Stocking said. (PH)

Against the hard-core climate change deniers no amount of evidence will make much difference. But evidence aplenty there has been in 2007 that environmental damage is accumulating because of global warming, and doing major damage to communities, nations and continents. As ever, it has been the poor who have been the most vulnerable, and who have lost most in terms of lives, possessions and livelihoods; in most places it is women and children who bear the brunt.

Most of all, 2007 has been the year of the flood. But is has also been the year of the forest fire on several continents, most notably in Greece and the United States.

Mega floods

Increased rainfall in many area (although not all) is indeed one of the obvious consequences o global warming. This year we've seen:

- Two waves of massive flooding in China in June and September-October in the centre and south of the country that have killed more than 1000 people.
- Connected with the same storms over southern China, Vietanm suffered widespread flooding in October and November which by the time this was written (early November) had killed more than 120 people.
- The worst floods in living memory in Central Africa, stretching from coast to coast, devastating crops and drowning hundreds.
- Unprecedented flooding in north and central England in June.

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– What the Mexican president called the “greatest natural disaster of the country’s history” as the state of Tabasco was submerged for the second time in a decade, leaving dozens dead and making 100,000 homeless.

– Hundreds died in India in several waves of flooding from Mumbai, where 500 died, to Bihar where a similar trail of devastation occurred.

– Several waves of flooding in the south east of Australia that wrecked the wine crop in many areas.

Much of this catastrophe has hardly been reported in the Western media; the fire risk to homes of Malibu celebs is of course of much more interest to the right-wing media than millions of workers and peasants in Africa or Asia!

Africa

Twenty-two African countries are experiencing their worst wet seasons in decades, and experts say that global warming is to blame. Devastating rains and flash floods have affected 1.5 million people across the continent, killing at least 300 since early summer.

West Africa has seen its most severe floods in years, as torrents swamped the Democratic Republic of the Congo's capital of Kinshasa in late October, killing 30 people in less than 24 hours. In northern Ghana, more than 300,000 people have been uprooted by devastating downpours.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/africaflood.jpg>]

In East Africa, meanwhile, hundreds of thousands have been displaced and scores killed in Uganda, Sudan, Kenya, and Ethiopia.

As the rains continue, African meteorologists are warning that these events may be fulfilling predictions that the continent will suffer some of the worst effects of global warming. "Africa will be the hardest hit by climate change," said Grace Akumu, director of the Kenya-based nonprofit Climate Network Africa. "This is happening even faster than expected."

China

The China news agency says more than 1300 people HAVE DIES IN China this summer as a result of flooding. Another 332 missing; crops on at least 15.43 million hectares of farmland have been destroyed and 1.22 million houses ruined.

Direct economic losses were estimated to have amounted to 155.8 billion yuan (US\$19.3 billion), according Vice-Minister of Water Resources E Jingping .

The middle and downstream of Xijiang River in the Pearl River basin suffered a disastrous flood, and Hunan and Heilongjiang were hit by serious mountain torrents, mud-rock flows and landslides.

The hardest-hit areas include the provinces of Fujian, Anhui, Zhejiang and Hainan in southern and eastern China, which have also been plagued by seven typhoons and cyclones that claimed 221 lives.

However, continued heavy rainfall during the National Day holiday has caused the biggest flood in a decade along the lower reaches of the Weihe River and the middle reaches of the Hanjiang River in Shaanxi and Hubei provinces.

Sections of the rivers running through Shaanxi in northwest China overflowed, forcing 359,000 people to be evacuated.

More than 4.6 million people in 61 counties were affected by floods and mud slides, which ruined 79,800 hectares of crops and destroyed 39,200 houses.

India and Bangladesh

Floods in the monsoon season are normal in the sub-continent, but this year have been particularly severe, with hundreds killed in Bihar and Mumbai. In Bangladesh two-thirds of the country is submerged and 164 people died in flooding this year. The monsoon rain is getting heavier because of warming oceans, but the human impact on the poor is made worse by poverty, the caste system and state corruption and indifference.

In Bihar more than 2 million people were forced out of their homes and overwhelmingly it was women who had to take the responsibility for finding food, firewood and shelter for themselves and their children. A high proportion of the worst affected were Dalits – so-called ‘untouchables’.

According to the Dalit campaign for Human Rights, relief was least likely to reach the low-caste villagers:

"The relative neglect of low-caste villagers was a reflection of how, even at a moment of shared hardship, the rules of caste dictate how Indian society operates, he added. The culture of discrimination which runs through Indian society intensifies in times of crisis."

Aid distribution is often done in town centers, where well-off, upper-caste groups are more likely to live. Those who are geographically marginalized in low-lying, remote villages, far from the national highways, find that supplies dwindle by the time they arrive in town, if they are able to make the journey.

A heart rending account of the misery suffered by in Bihar State came last week with the story of an upper-caste police officer accused of drowning two lower-caste girls in the river after they stole firewood from his orchard.

Dry tinder has become a precious commodity in Bihar, vital to survival in the damp post-flood period. According to a villager who complained to the police, when the police officer found Chandani Kumari, 6, and Kamali Kumari, 13, taking wood from his property, he threw them into a fast-moving river. Neither of the girls could swim.

The officer was suspended and a compensation payment of 100,000 rupees, or \$2,400, was given to the girls' parents. S.L. Das, the local police superintendent, said, adding that he believed the girls were chased, not thrown, into the river.

In Bangladesh flooding relief put big pressure on the national budget. The World Bank has insisted that to improve national finances the government must put up the price of heating fuel – and thereby deal a cruel blow to the vast majority of poor families who depend on it for heating and cooking.

The Bihar experience shows how wrong flood-control strategies, unscrupulous politicians, unresponsive bureaucracy and corruption have left thousands displaced and economically ruined. Since Independence, successive Bihar governments have sold embankments as an answer to floods, despite warnings that these earthen structures only exacerbate the problem.

The reason behind this pro-embankment policy is easy to understand: it helps perpetuate the well-oiled politician-technocrat-contractor nexus. Cuts and kickbacks are the order of the day, as politicians get a rake off from the construction company firms, who receive large amounts of aid money for rebuilding the embankment levees,

which again make the problem worse.

Mexico

In 1998 the Mexican state of Tabasco was inundated and in late October this year it happened again. The worsening of tropical storms in central America and the Caribbean is the direct result of sea warming in the Gulf of Mexico. In addition 16 rivers overran their banks in the rebel state of Chiapas. The effects of this flooding are still ongoing as this article is written. According to the BBC (4 November):

“Beyond Mexico's borders the effects of the tropical depression have been felt in other Central American states. Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador have already suffered from three weeks of heavy downpours.

In total more than 50 people have been killed and 100,000 have been forced to evacuate.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/mexicofloods34.jpg>]

Some large areas are facing epidemics and food shortages .

Millions of dollars worth of crops across the region have been ruined and outbreaks of malaria, cholera and dengue fever have been reported in some of the worst hit areas.“

The floods completely wiped out crops in the region, and a farm association estimated losses at 480 million dollars.

Health officials have meanwhile started to fret about looming health risks from open sewage and the spread of disease-carrying mosquitoes. Dengue, cholera and diarrhea outbreaks now are very real possibilities.

What has really animated the state and national government is that the hungry people of Villhermosa, capital of Tabasco have started to loot supermarkets to get food. Thousands of desperate and hungry people cannot be allowed to breach property laws for the mere purpose of getting something to eat!

Firestorms

Many parts of the Greek countryside burnt with savage ferocity this summer as temperatures reached 46 C, and more than 60 people were killed in cut-off villages. Even if some of these fires were started by arsonists, they widespread effect can only be explained by global warming. The ecology of Greece is changing permanently. An arid country is threatened with becoming a desert if Mediterranean countries continue to experience routine temperatures above 40o in the summer.

Brush fires are normal events in California, part of the natural cycle, but events like this year's fires are not. According to American writer Mike Davis:

“Th Los Angeles Times had an article that said climate change wasn't a factor in the fires. This is probably balderdash. Everything that's happening, including the dramatic number of mega-fires in the rest of the West, accords with the simulations generated in the climate models used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Not only are extreme events becoming more common, but it's possible that the base climate of the Southwest and most of the rest of the West is itself changing.”

Davis also points out how an alliance of Republican politicians and property developers have been responsible for continued house building in the fire-prone backlands, despite repeated warnings about fire dangers. He also showed how the media had highlighted the danger to the houses of celebrities like John Travolta and Sting, rather than the much worse plight of poor people in areas like San Diego.

Capitalism Collides with Nature

There have always been floods and forest fires. But the intensity and widespread nature of these events is vivid evidence of the impact of climate change. No one can now possibly believe that climate change is a victimless crime; thousands of people are dying each year from its effects, many thousands more are being made ill, being made eco-refugees or losing their livelihoods.

Each of the floods and fires referred to above has its own unique causes. But behind each one of them is increasing global temperatures, and in particular rising sea temperatures. It's rising sea temperatures off West Africa which start many of the tropical storms that end up as hurricanes in the Bay of Mexico; it's the warming of the same seas that triggered the floods in central Africa this year. Sea warming is worsening the monsoons affecting the sub-continent and South East Asia.

In each cases it's the poor, living in flimsy houses in marginal areas near dangerous dams, levees or mountainsides that are the victims of the flash floods and the mudslides. In each case it's the poor who are the victims when disaster relief money is siphoned off by the rich and corrupt officials. And it's the poor who have no back-up resources when their fields and crops are damaged, their homes are destroyed.

Climate change is not a danger, it's a reality. Its effects are hitting the poor now, and the rich and powerful are making things worse. Whether it's war, earthquake or climate change, the poor pay the price.

Climate change experts have long warned that global warming could have devastating consequences:

• More than a billion people may face freshwater shortages by 2050, especially in Asia, where rising living standards for the middle class will lead to increased water demand.

• Millions more will be threatened by floods due to rising sea levels, with island inhabitants and populations in large river-delta regions in Asia most at risk.

Dry areas may become drier, with crop yields dropping by as much as 50 percent in sub-tropical regions by 2020.

• Higher rates of climate-related illness, including malnutrition, malaria, dengue fever, and heatstroke could take effect.

Capitalist productivism, the incessant production of more and more useless commodities, is responsible for this crisis. Solving the crisis means ending the system.