

Floods in Assam in 2017

Floods are not new to Assam. The people of the state are so used to floods in the monsoons that it is almost called the 'flood season' in Assam. What is new is the duration and severity of these floods in 2017.

As on August 19, 2017, in what seems to be the state's worst deluge in three decades, the death toll in the second wave of floods rose to 15, with 10 more deaths reported on last Sunday. With over 10 lakh people affected, the total number of flood victims shot up to 15 lakh across 21 out of 27 districts in Assam. Over 85% of the Kaziranga National Park (KNP) was inundated causing loss of wild life.

Relief camps are not easy to set up in flood hit Assam as roads get submerged, delaying supplies and raising the number of affected people.

More than 1.83 lakh displaced people have taken shelter in 439 relief camps. Rescue operations by the Army, Indian Air Force, National Disaster Response Force and the State Disaster Response Force personnel are underway, said state project co-coordinator of Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) Rajib Prakash Baruah. About 3,000 villagers were rescued and shifted to relief camps on Sunday, said defence PRO Lt Col S Newton of Armed Forces.

ECHO has offered Euro 200,000 to IFRC to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable 25,000 individuals in Assam. Focus is on reducing suffering of these individuals. Local civil society has shown rapid response with Inter Agency Group calling coordination meetings for relief distribution. Sphere India has taken measures to coordinate relief efforts in Assam.

UNICEF in Assam has focused on children and their role in flood response.

Besides Assam, incessant rain in the last five days has wreaked havoc in Meghalaya and claimed three lives. Nearly 800 people were rendered homeless in South and West Garo Hills district in western Meghalaya, officials said. There were reports of flash floods and landslides in different parts of Khasi Hills causing loss of agriculture and local horticulture.

Dr. Muzaffar Ahmed, Ex-member NDMA, has suggested relief as an investment into resilience to floods. This includes not only investments in recovery but also in risk transfer and micro-insurance.

Dr. Santosh Kumar, policy and planning faculty at National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM), has often called for an HRD plan for the states to continuously improve the quality of humanitarian response.

Flood fury has claimed at least three lives and affected over five lakh people in West Bengal. Rail and road communication has been severely hit. Cooch Behar district was virtually cut off from the rest of India with vehicular and train movement coming to a stop. Around 2.87 lakh people were displaced in Cooch Behar, and another two lakh in Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts and over 50,000 were hit in Malda, North Dinajpur, Darjeeling and South Dinajpur district. World Bank has taken initial steps to reach out to these victims with food, water and other relief supplies.

The ASDMA is one of the few state authorities in India to have picked up the integration of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) in all its work.

Overall, as many as 20 states in the country have been affected during the current southwest monsoon season in the country. According to the available information, 600 people have lost their lives; 24,811 cattle heads have perished; 63,215 houses/huts damaged and about 2.8 lakh hectare of crop reportedly affected due to heavy rains; floods and landslides. Data is still being gathered and compiled to get a clearer picture of the loss and damage brought about by these floods.

Assam has plans, people, and resources to respond to the challenge. What may be added is expert third party monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

Assam has taken up several initiatives to improve its response and preparedness capacities against disasters particularly - floods and earthquakes. These includes but is not limited to a series of city-wide emergency management exercises; training, mock drills and plan of disaster management in schools in all the districts; community-based early warning; developing and reviewing the district disaster management plans; and a review of flood studies.

Possible key steps that can support the flood preparedness in the state include higher investment on flood protection; strong actions to protect wetlands; introducing water storage areas; closer and stronger linked DRR and CCA actions; constructing buildings above flood levels (it is in the tradition of the Assam that needs to remind in current time); and stronger implementation of land usage (for construction) norms. ■

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