

KEEPING DRY: ON KERALA FLOODS

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

The catastrophic impact of monsoon rainfall on several districts of Kerala has come as a grim reminder that the vigil against unpredictable natural disasters must never be relaxed. More than three dozen people have died and an estimated 8,316 crore worth of economic assets have been lost in the seasonal rain, particularly over the past week. The gates of reservoirs in the Idukki system, a giant hydroelectric project, and several other dams have been opened, inundating riverside habitations downstream. At the peak of the havoc, about 60,000 people whose dwellings suffered damage were lodged in relief camps. In the northern districts, damage to houses, roads and other structures has occurred owing to landslips caused by incessant showers. There is genuine concern that a temporary respite in rainfall may be followed by another intense downpour from nascent weather systems; the India Meteorological Department has forecast rain until August 17. It is to Kerala's credit that the deluge has led not to a partisan blame game over planning, relief and rehabilitation, but an all-round effort to look ahead and plan for reconstruction. The Centre has done well to get a first-hand estimate of the havoc from Home Minister Rajnath Singh, although the initial announcement of 100 crore towards relief is incongruous with the scale of the damage. Crucial support has come from the armed forces as well to normalise the situation.

Kerala's unusually heavy monsoon this year is in contrast to the long-period trend of rainfall. According to an analysis of data on the monsoon between 1954 and 2003 by climate researchers at the University of Cambridge, overall this part of the country had become drier in summer, but with an emerging frequency of destructive flash floods in rare events. This trend is expected to become stronger. This points to the need for governments to strengthen their resilience planning. It should begin with a programme to relocate people away from hazard zones along the rivers that were in spate in Kerala over the past week after the shutters of more than two dozen dams were opened. Finding suitable land is, of course, a challenge in a populous, forested State, but it is an absolute necessity to prepare for the future. It is reasonable to expect that with its efficient primary health care network, Kerala will take all measures necessary to avoid epidemics in the wake of the floods. The spectacular disaster this year also underscores the role of the government as the insurer of last resort for the average citizen. In Mumbai last year, for instance, those who had private household insurance cover against disasters discovered the limitations of such policies, since the companies were unwilling to pay many home owners for a key risk such as costly displacement from homes since the houses were not structurally damaged. All States naturally look to Kerala, with its record of social development, for evolving best practices to handle such natural disasters.

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