Beat: Miscellaneous

Death toll from N. Korean floods hits 28, tens of thousands in need of help

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USPA News - The death toll from severe floods in the western region of North Korea has risen to at least 28, the government and aid workers reported on Friday, while several others remain missing and tens of thousands more are in need of immediate help. The floods were triggered by torrential rains that hit most parts of the country between July 12 and July 22, destroying more than 4,500 houses and leaving more than 49,.000 people displaced.

North and South Pyongan provinces were the worst-hit regions, although nearly all provinces have reported both damage and casualties. Figures released by the government on Friday showed at least 28 people were killed by the rains and subsequent floods, including seven people in North Pyongan province, seven people in Kangwon province, six people in South Pyongan province, and two people in the capital Pyongyang. Eighteen people are known to remain missing, including six in Kangwon province. Earlier, the Hydro-meteorological Service in North Korea said it recorded 413 millimeters (16.2 inches) of rainfall in Tongsin County of Chagang province between 9 p.m. on July 19 and 3 p.m. on July 21, making it the worst affected area in terms of rainfall. The rainfall in the wider region was nearly twice the average amount of rainfall for the month of July, which marks the start of the annual rainy season. According to an assessment released by the Red Cross on Friday, most of the affected people have either been evacuated to public buildings that have been converted into temporary shelters or have sought shelter with other families within their neighborhoods whose houses are still intact. "Early crops including potatoes have perished due to the prolonged rains, where some of these food stocks were washed away by the flood," the Red Cross said in its assessment, adding that at least 13,340 hectares (32,963 acres) of arable land was destroyed. "The flooding is estimated to have a longer term impact on food security and livelihood as the crop lands (rice and maize) were affected by flood and erosion, destroying embankment and irrigation channels in the process." The recent floods have also caused severe disruption to the population`s access to safe water in the affected area, and it is likely to take months before water supply systems have been restored to operate at full capacity. A United Nations (UN) team estimated Thursday that at least 240,.000 people require access to safe drinking water, although the actual figure is likely higher. "In urban communities where the water supply system relied on pumps, the situation is serious as the water pumps are submerged in water and can no longer function," the Red Cross said. "In rural communities, the affected population is currently relying on alternative water sources like dug wells, hand pumps, boreholes and surface water which run a high risk of contamination." In response to the disaster, local Red Cross disaster response teams have deployed two water treatment units in the worst affected area. They have also worked to mobilize a number of volunteers to assist in rescue operations, evacuations, and the operation of the water purification units. Approximately 80 percent of Anju City, located in South Pyongyang province, is believed to remain flooded with flood waters up to 2 meters (6.5 feet) deep, according to aid workers who visited the affected area. The city was flooded on early Sunday morning when rising waters in the Chongchon River caused embankments to break. "The local police have been involved in providing rescue services to the affected people," the UN`s North Korea office said on Thursday. It said the North Korean government has provided food and water trucks for drinking water to affected communities, as well as medicine kits which were supplied by the Red Cross last month. Additionally, the North Korean Red Cross has released 2,690 emergency relief kits, including quilts, cooking sets, tarpaulins, jerry cans, hygiene kits and water purification tablets which were distributed to 10,895 people in Anju City and Tosan county of North Hwanghae province. Last year, at least 169 people were killed and around 400 others went missing when severe weather hit North Korea on two occasions. At least 88 people were killed by tropical storm Khanun and dozens more died just days later when torrential rains hit the impoverished nation again. The North estimated more than 212,.000 people were left homeless, forcing the government to request international assistance. KCNA`s reporting of severe floods in 2011 was heavily criticized after it distributed a photo which appeared to have been digitally altered to make the disaster look worse than it may have been. North Korean state-run media normally keeps quiet or downplays problems in the country, and experts believe the North`s photoshopping may have been an attempt to receive more international aid.

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