

Beat: Miscellaneous

Death toll from N. Korean floods hits 33 amid food, clean water concerns

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USPA News - The death toll from severe floods in the western region of North Korea has risen to at least 33, the government and aid workers reported on Friday amid increasing concerns about food security and illnesses due to contaminated water. 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 nearly 50,000 people displaced.

North and South Pyongan provinces were the worst-hit regions, although nearly all provinces have reported both damage and casualties. Updated figures released by the government on Friday showed at least 33 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 more than twice the average amount of rainfall for the month of July, which marks the start of the annual rainy season. The government's latest assessment indicated more than 11,750 buildings were either heavily damaged or completely destroyed, leaving nearly 48,700 people homeless, the vast majority of them in the provinces of North and South Pyongan. Most of the affected people have been evacuated to public buildings that have been converted into temporary shelters or have sought shelter with other families. In addition to residential houses, the government's survey showed 27 schools in four provinces were completely destroyed by the floods, with 10 others badly damaged, but schooling is not yet being affected as students are currently on summer break. Medical facilities such as hospitals, clinics and nursing homes have also been affected, with three of them being destroyed and 14 others badly damaged. "UN agencies carried out assessment missions on 24 July to two counties in North Pyongan - Pakchon and Taechon," the UN's North Korean office said in a situation report on Friday. "Their reports and of other agencies that have been in the field since then, though in limited areas, substantiate Government figures." But there are increasing concerns about food security and waterborne diseases due to contaminated water. Government figures showed heavy rain and flooding destroyed at least 13,340 hectares (32,963 acres) of arable land, which may affect food security in the region in the long term. The UN mission said damage to standing crops appears to be less extensive than initial reports had suggested, but damage to paddy fields are likely to increase as many irrigation canals having been destroyed or badly damaged. "These systems are necessary to irrigate paddy later in the year to avoid further crop losses and will require construction materials such as steel and cement soon to enable their repair," the office said in its latest report. 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 team estimated Friday that at least 283,000 people require immediate access to safe drinking water, although the actual figure is likely higher. "In urban communities where water supply systems relied on pumps, the situation is serious as these have now been submerged in water and are not functioning," the Red Cross said. "In rural communities, the affected population is relying on alternative water sources like dug wells, hand pumps, boreholes and surface water which run 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 hundreds of volunteers to assist in rescue operations, evacuations, and the operation of the water purification units. Illnesses from waterborne diseases due to contaminated water were being reported in the area, although the extent is unknown. "Damage to water systems is widespread and there is already an increased incidence of diarrhea in some areas," the UN said, adding that water systems in more than 30 communities have been damaged. Anju City, located in South Pyongan province with a population of more than 240,000, also remains without clean drinking water and it is expected to take at least two weeks before pumping stations are operational again. Approximately 80 percent of the city was flooded with flood waters up to 2 meters (6.5 feet) deep in the first days of the disaster. "The local police have been involved in providing rescue services to the affected people," the UN's North Korea office said in an earlier report. 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 in June. The North Korean Red Cross has so far provided relief items to more than 4,850 families in North Pyongan, South Pyongan, and North Hwanghae provinces. This includes 4,674 tarpaulins, 4,851 kitchen sets, 19,553 quilts, 1,733 hygiene kits, 2,451 jerry cans, 381 shelter kits, and nearly 1.2 million water purification tables. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies also announced Friday that it has allocated 299,744 Swiss franc (\$322,512) from its disaster relief emergency fund (DREF) to support the North Korean Red Cross in delivering immediate assistance to more than 20,000 people. 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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