

Environment News Futures

Human Actions are Key Contributors to so called 'Act of God' Disasters

Bloomberg—Posted by Nisha Anand

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Our collective burning of fossil fuels is intensifying and increasing the frequency of storms and droughts, heat waves and wildfires. But that's not all.

At the start of September, torrential rain in the Mediterranean led to severe flooding, infrastructure damage and deaths in multiple countries. As climate change expedites more extreme weather events like this, we need to consider how they're framed. These so-called natural disasters are often construed as "Acts of God," both actuarially and colloquially, but most of time the blame more fairly lies on human actions.



A volunteer uses a tree branch trying to prevent a forest fire from reaching houses in the village of Casal da Quinta, outside Leiria, central Portugal, July (AP).

A low pressure system, named Storm Daniel by the Hellenic National Meteorological Service, dumped downpours over 10 days across several nations, including Spain, Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey and Libya. The rain in Spain fell over just a few hours, yet major flooding still led to five fatalities. Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey had precipitation for four days, submerging Greece's agricultural center, the Thessalian plain. The storm then strengthened into a "medicane," a Mediterranean

hurricane, dropping record-high amounts of water on Libya over 24 hours on Sept. 10-11. Many areas were reported to have received between 150 millimeters and 240 millimeters of precipitation, with the town of Al-Bayda getting 414.1 mm. By comparison, in an average year, the coastal city of Derna — the epicenter of Libya’s resulting crisis — gets just 274 mm of rain.

For years, discussion around how to adapt to a rapidly changing climate was hindered by many who argued that it would reduce pressure to cut emissions. That attitude has arguably lingered in news reporting of some events and risks letting governments get away with not doing enough to protect their citizens.

A prolonged food shortage in Madagascar, for example, was roundly portrayed in the media as the world’s first climate-driven famine, resulting from years of drought. Those stories missed the core problem, though: bad governance and greed. Corporate land grabs have taken up much of the agricultural terrain while communities slip further into poverty. Indeed, an attribution study found that climate change wasn’t a significant driver of the food insecurity in Madagascar at all.

Elsewhere, land-management decisions have transformed absorbent wetlands into slick concrete — a factor behind the 2021 floods in Germany — and societal structures have made certain groups more exposed, such as in India where caste-based discrimination prevented some from entering evacuation shelters during cyclones.

Making these vulnerabilities part of the dialogue is the first step to taking effective action. Yet it doesn’t help that adaptation funding globally is still a fraction of the money that goes to emissions reduction. That’s becoming a more critical issue: Although deaths from natural disasters have been decreasing on the whole as disaster management has improved, climate change is making it much harder by spurring events well outside of previous experiences. Some measures may be expensive, but any costs involved will pale in comparison to doing nothing.

It’s hard to say whether proper maintenance would have completely prevented the dam bursts in Libya in the face of such an intense event. But it’s clear that human activity intensified both the threat and weaknesses, so much so that the people of Derna didn’t stand a chance.

So next time there’s a natural disaster, don’t forget: We’re making things so much worse for ourselves on the ground, too.

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Hindustan Times and its owners.

Plastic Levels in Lake Geneva as High as World’s Oceans

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Oceaneye, a Geneva-based non-profit, has turned its attention closer to home to landlocked Switzerland.

Lake Geneva, nestled at the foot of the Alps, has long been considered as a near-pristine body of water, but new research has found that its plastic pollution levels are as high as those in the oceans.

California is Engaged in the World’s Largest Dam Removal Project in Hopes of Letting Nature Rebound

A national push to “rewild” looks to restore natural environments that might help mitigate the effects of climate change.

HORNBROOK, Calif. — This time next year, a series of massive dams that block off the Klamath River will no longer exist. The soil and rocks originally dug and transported from a nearby mountain in the 1950s will be returned to their home and the river will run freely again.

The Iron Gate Dam, which opened in 1964 as the last of four dams that, at nearly 200 feet tall each, regulated the flow of the river and time releases for the local water supply in Northern California, is now part of the world's largest dam removal and river restoration project. Iron Gate is scheduled to be the final stop for decommissioning crews.

One of the dams, Copco2, was removed earlier this year in just a handful of months. It was a relatively quick undertaking, considering the construction of the Iron Gate Dam took nearly a decade.

Mark Bransom, the CEO of the Klamath River Renewal Corporation, said the river will be able to flow freely once the dam's infrastructure is removed. He also said they have plans to help nature take back the area.

"As soon as the reservoir is drained, we'll get out on the footprint there and begin some initial restoration activity," Bransom said. "We want to stabilize the remaining sediments using native vegetation." One of the fastest ways to heal a river is to remove a dam," Ann Willis, the California regional director for American Rivers, a nonprofit focused on protecting clean water, said. "The good news is, when you have the opportunity to unjam a river, the river can start to restore itself almost from the moment that the water starts flowing again."

China Bans Seafood from Japan After Fukushima Nuclear Plant Begins Releasing Wastewater

The plan to release treated radioactive water into the ocean, which officials say is necessary to decommission the wrecked plant, has been criticized at home and abroad.

Japan began to release treated radioactive water from the wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant into the ocean Thursday amid opposition from some domestic activists and loud objections from neighboring countries including China, which announced a ban on all seafood from the country.

The gradual discharge of an estimated 1.3 million metric tons of wastewater from the destroyed Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean began around 1 p.m. local time (12 a.m. Thursday ET), said the plant's operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co. (Tepco).

The whole process is expected to take about 30 years to complete.

Major Shipping Routes are Struggling with Water Shortages. El Niño could make it worse.

The effects of El Niño tend to peak in December, but its full impact typically takes time to spread around the globe.

El Niño — or "the little boy" in Spanish — marks the unusual warming of the surface waters in the tropical central and eastern Pacific Ocean. It is a naturally occurring climate pattern which takes place on average every two to seven years.

The effects of El Niño tend to peak during December, but its full impact typically takes time to spread across the globe. This lag is why forecasters believe 2024 could be the first year when humanity surpasses the key climate threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius. Global average temperatures in 2022 were 1.1 degrees Celsius warmer when compared with the late 19th century.

Indonesia's President Launches Carbon Emissions Credit Trading

By Stefano Sulaiman

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JAKARTA, Sept 26 (Reuters) - Indonesian President Joko Widodo on Tuesday launched the country's first carbon emission credit trading, with the aim of creating a market to fund cuts in greenhouse gas emissions and become a major participant in the global carbon trade.

Indonesia, an archipelago home to the world's third-largest rainforest area, is also one of the world's top greenhouse gas emitters. The Southeast Asian country has set a target of reaching carbon neutrality by 2060.

Asteroid Sample Parachuted in Utah, USA. First Time in Space Mission

Dusty samples from the "most dangerous known rock in the Solar System" have been brought to Earth.

The American space agency Nasa landed the materials in a capsule that came down in the West Desert of Utah state. The samples had been scooped up from the surface of asteroid Bennu in 2020 by the Osiris-Rex spacecraft.

Nasa wants to learn more about the mountainous object, not least because it has an outside chance of hitting our planet in the next 300 years (*See Snapshot 2*).

Africa Proposes Global Carbon Taxes to Fight Climate Change

Published

African leaders have proposed a global carbon tax regime in a joint declaration.

The Nairobi Declaration capped the three-day Africa Climate Summit in Kenya's capital. The document, released on Wednesday, demanded that major polluters commit more resources to help poorer nations.

African heads of state said they will use it as the basis of their negotiating position at November's COP28 summit.

- Climate change and crocodiles in a Kenyan lake
- What you should know about climate change in Africa
- How Africa will be affected by climate change