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South India floods a result of climate change: Red Cross

By Joydeep Gupta

Bangkok, Oct 6 (IANS) The floods in south India that have killed at least 350 people and made millions homeless are a result of climate change, said an expert in the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre.

The sudden shift from "extreme drought" to "extreme floods" in the region was in consonance with the last report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), head of the climate centre Madeleen Helmer said here Tuesday.

In its 2007 fourth assessment report, the IPCC had said that one of the consequences of global warming would be more extreme weather events - droughts, floods and storms would become more frequent and more severe.

Experts shadowing the Sep 28-Oct 9 talks here between 177 countries in preparation for the Copenhagen climate summit this December have pointed out that these predictions have been borne out by a series of disasters in Asia in recent weeks - floods in India and typhoons in the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand.

"The problem with humanitarian aid agencies like ours is, what do you prepare for," Helmer told IANS, "when after extreme drought, you have extreme floods? Climate change is telling us we have to prepare for both, that we are in an age of more uncertainty. It's not easy and we're not geared to do it, but we'll have to be."

Richard Rumsey, director of disaster risk reduction and community resilience in the international NGO World Vision, said: "The problem is that the system is now being so stretched to provide short-term relief, to respond to all these climate disasters, that there is little planning to build long-term resilience of people to face climate change."

The NGO has seen its own budget to disaster response climbing in recent years.

"In 1998, 15 percent (\$90 million) of World Vision's overall expenditure was spent on relief activities," Rumsey said. "Ten years later, it accounted for 35 percent (\$644 million)."

As the number of climate disasters has climbed from an average of 200 per year in the 1990s to an average of 350 per year this decade, governments in industrialised countries have been forced to increase their response.

Brett Parris of World Vision pointed out that the percentage of overseas development aid (ODA) going for this "humanitarian response" had increased from 4 percent in the 1990s to 9 percent now.

Parris told IANS that the NGO had calculated that industrialised countries would have to pay developing countries \$150 billion per year to help them adapt to climate change and to mitigate the emission of greenhouse gases that are leading to global warming.

The World Bank recently estimated yjsy developing countries will need \$100 billion a year for adaptation alone.

"The current level of financing and the current pace of negotiations here is not good enough," Parris said. "They will take the world well beyond a two-degrees Celsius rise in temperature. That will be catastrophic and we'll need a lot more money to deal with those disasters."

According to Parris, developing countries were perfectly right to demand that industrialised countries reduce their greenhouse gas emissions far more than they were willing to do now. "Strong (emission reduction) targets are what science demands, they are not bargaining positions."

India and many developing countries have demanded that industrialised nations reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40 percent by 2020, compared to 1990 levels.