

At least 18 dead as late monsoon causes havoc across north India

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Children play on a flooded street as a car drives past after heavy rains in Gurugram, on the outskirts of New Delhi [File: Adnan Abidi/Reuters]

New Delhi, October 10 (RHC)-- Heavy rain has lashed parts of northern India, forcing schools to close in several cities as an unusually late rainy season prolonged havoc across the country and killed at least 18 people over the past 24 hours.

The state-run Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) on Monday said heavy rainfall was expected for the northern states of Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and parts of Rajasthan until Tuesday.

The rainy season usually draws to a close in northwest India from mid-September, and it should be ending across the country by mid-October.

Some environmentalists suspect climate change is behind the unusually wet weather. Parts of northwest India got 1,293 percent more rainfall than normal on Sunday, with Uttar Pradesh receiving as much as 22.5mm, the IMD said.

Eighteen people were killed in various accidents attributed to the rain over the past 24 hours in the state, including drownings and electrocutions, authorities said. Three people were killed when a building collapsed in the capital, New Delhi, as heavy rain drenched the city on Sunday, Indian news agency ANI reported. It was not immediately clear if rain caused the collapse.

One benefit of rain has been cleaner air. Delhi's air improved significantly because of the weekend downpours with the quality index at 36, in the "good" category, early on Monday, according to the US embassy's air pollution monitor.

Incessant rain and floods have been a bane for big Indian cities in the past month, including the tech hub Bengaluru in southern India and the business district of Gurugram near New Delhi.

The heavy rainfall has also damaged key summer-sown crops such as rice, soybean, cotton, pulses and vegetables just before harvesting, which could stoke food inflation in Asia's third biggest economy, farmers, traders and industry officials said.

Higher food prices could prompt New Delhi to slap additional restrictions on exports of food commodities such as rice, wheat, and sugar, and potentially force the Reserve Bank of India to raise key interest rates again.

"There has been so much rainfall from the last one week that now we can see sprouts from the paddy seeds," said Narendra Shukla, a 36-year-old farmer from Barabanki in Uttar Pradesh. The entire paddy crop, which could have been harvested in two weeks, has flattened and Shukla is now waiting for the weather to clear so he can finish the task and plant potatoes.

Crop damage is likely to push already rising food prices up further [File: Danish Siddiqui/Reuters] Uttar Pradesh, the country's second biggest producer of rice, has received 500 percent more rainfall than normal so far in October.

Crop damage could lead to a reduction in yields and a deterioration in harvest quality since crops were ready for gathering and in some places harvested crops were already drying, said Harish Galipelli, director at ILA Commodities India Pvt Ltd, which trades farm goods.

Indian farmers usually plant summer-sown crops in June-July with the arrival of monsoon rains, with harvesting starting from mid-September.

But this year the cycle was delayed by lower rainfall in June and while crops are now ready for harvesting, an area of low pressure is bringing heavy rainfall in northwestern and eastern parts of the country and delaying the end of the southwest monsoon.

Northern and eastern areas are expected to see heavy rainfall in the first half of this week, while southern India could get above average precipitation in the second half, said a senior IMD official.

Crop damage is likely to push already rising food prices up further, said a Mumbai-based dealer with a global trading firm. "The government and the RBI are under pressure to bring down inflation. The downward revision in crop production numbers means more and prolonged export curbs," the dealer said. The RBI has already raised its benchmark repo rate by 190 basis points this year.

Neighbouring Pakistan has also been hit by unprecedented flooding and the government there blames climate change for unusually heavy rain and for accelerating the melting of Himalayan glaciers. Heavy rain over the past five days has triggered landslides and flash floods across Nepal, stranding dozens of foreign hikers and climbers in several places, authorities there said. October is usually the beginning of the clear, dry trekking season in Nepal.

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