

Flood kills 4

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Bhutan hit by record rainfall and floods



27 May, 2009 - Bhutan experienced record-breaking rainfall in the last three days as numerous streams and rivers in the country surged to dangerous flood levels, killing two students, a soldier, and a road construction employee from India, as well as cutting off several places as roads and bridges were damaged.

The casualties were two students from Thimphu washed away, a soldier in Dewathang hit by a falling tree, and an Indian labourer in Takti while clearing a landslide area.

The average rainfall in the last 24 hours – from May 25, 9:00 a.m. to May 26, 9:00 a.m. - was recorded at around 76 mm, which, Thimphu meteorology department says, is the highest in the last five years.

However many observers said that they had not seen such a volume of water in the last 40 years. The continuous rainfall in the country is because of the cyclone ‘Aila’ from the Bay of Bengal, which hit Bhutan on May 24, said the head of meteorology, Kunzang Sonam. Cyclone ‘Aila’ has so far killed 115 people and displaced half a million in West Bengal and Bangladesh.

“All ministries, sectors and dzongkhags have been put on red alert and the armed forces have been mobilised,” Lyonchhoen Jigmi Y Thinley told Kuensel. He said the police in particular has been mobilised at all danger zones. “His Majesty the King, who is very concerned, has also been informed,” he said.

In Thimphu, residents braced for the swiftly rising Wangchu and the capital’s numerous streams to spill their banks. Many did. Worries of major flooding extended well beyond Thimphu. Residents along the banks of the rivers in Punakha, Ha, and Thimphu left their homes for higher ground. Bridges were washed away and several places flooded. Panicked residents in Thimphu rushed to fuel stations anticipating a shortage.

According to the latest data, as of 4:00 p.m. yesterday, major rivers like Wangchu, Punatsangchu, Kurichu, Mangdechu, Chamkarchu, and Parochu had either doubled in size or, in most cases, had swollen to a record 5-6 times their size.

“The Punatsangchu has increased to levels higher than the 1994 floods this evening after 4:00 p.m. and later went down a bit,” said Lyonchhoen.

The Thimphu Phuentsholing highway has been washed away at many places. By last evening, about six landslides had been created between Chukha and Takti. The highway was shut down by the road safety and transport authority. Dantak officials said that it may take 72 hours to build a new road through the Tanalung slide, where about 40 m of road had been

wiped away.

Hydropower projects were forced to close down. The 336 MW Chukha hydropower was shut from 12 noon till 3:45 p.m. Basochu remained shut and Kurichu reduced production from 50 MW to 26 MW. Kurichu is the sole station that supplies power to the eastern dzongkhags. Tala is operating at 935 MW, with one of its six turbines under regular maintenance.

“The problem is with heavy debris like logs and mud in the Chukha dam and plus this is the highest volume of water we’ve seen since the project was commissioned in 1988,” said Druk Green Power Corporation managing director Chhewang Rinzin.

“Our local forecast says that the situation should get better from tomorrow onwards, but external forecasters have predicted two more days of the (Aila) cyclone affecting us,” said Lyonchhoen. He said that, so far, there was no serious damage to property, but this could change.

By Tenzing Lamsang

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