

January floods mark the beginning of the disaster year



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By David Singh

GENEVA, 6 February 2012 - Floods that began in January and which continue to heap misery on communities in Africa, the Americas, Australia and the Pacific, are a strong indication that over 100 million people will again be affected by floods this year in line with long-term trends.

“Widespread floods in January are in keeping with long-term disaster trends which show that floods are the most dominant disaster category when it comes to the numbers affected. Over the last ten years annual averages of 106 million people have had their lives disrupted by floods.

“The frequency and impact of the storms and floods last month should encourage local governments in coastal and riverside areas to put in place the budgeting and infrastructure necessary to reduce the impact of floods and prevent the significant loss of life and livelihoods which comes with them”, said UNISDR Head, Margareta Wahlström.

In Australia, inhabitants of the town of Moree who have only just recovered from a major flood in November are now preparing for their worst forecasted flood in more than 35 years. Communities throughout south-west Queensland and north-west New South Wales are affected. The Balonne River in St. George Queensland reached a new record height today, after the town of 3,000 residents was ordered to evacuate yesterday.

A state of disaster remains in effect in areas on the west coast of Fiji that were ravaged by floods from 22-24 January. A flood watch is also in place as more heavy rains are expected. People in flood-prone areas have been advised to evacuate and take food, water and a change

of clothes with them.

In Papua New Guinea, unusually heavy rainfall has resulted in floods and landslides that have damaged crops, houses, and roads as well as affected and displaced tens of thousands. On 25 January, a two-kilometre landslide destroyed two villages in the Southern Highlands province.

On January 15, Mozambique's southern coast was hit by tropical depression Dando followed by cyclone Funso. The storms caused severe damages and floods and also affected communities in Malawi and South Africa, displacing thousands and damaging infrastructure.

In the north of Namibia, on 19 January, after re-opening for the academic year, some 60 schools were closed and children sent home after flooding.

And in Brazil, heavy rains on 5 January caused a dam in the town of Campo de Goytacazes in the south-eastern state of Rio de Janeiro to burst and flood the area, forcing thousands of families from their homes. In the neighbouring state of Minas Gerais where above average rain has been falling since October last year, floods and mudslides have displaced at least 10,000 people.

Wahlström commented: "In light of the evidence which points towards increased hydro-meteorological hazards, can we really continue to say that these events are unexpected or are we simply just unprepared? The most important thing right now is to find immediate strategies to deal with displaced people and long-term strategies to protect communities from these life threatening yet preventable situations."

More low pressure systems are on the way in the Pacific. The same is true for Southern Africa, from now and right up to March. Hydrology experts at Namibia's Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry have said that the 2012 rainy season will last longer than last year; that flood levels and their impacts will be greater than last year; and that this year's floods are expected to set a record compared to previous years.

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Sources: United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction Secretariat (UNISDR)