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Floods in Libya Devastate Coastal City of Derna



Derna, Libya, after torrential rains burst through two dams near Derna, on Libya's northeastern coast, destroying much of the city. Photo Credit Ayman Al-Sahili/Reuters

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Although the Torrential rain started on September 4, 2023, as Storm Daniel that caused flooding in Greece swept across the Mediterranean Sea and intensified as a cyclone hitting Libya on September 10th which led to the collapse of two dams near Derna, a coastal city located in the northeastern part of Libya from 5-9 inches of rain. According to the World Health Organizations' recent information, the amount of people that lost their life and missed during flood passed 11,000. As of September 18, approximately 4,000 people have been identified, but over 9,000 people are still missing. The Libyan Red Crescent reported the death of at least 11,300 people. Numbers change every day according to Libya's representative to the United Nations, Taher El-Sonni. He also mentioned that flood surrounds the areas with a population of almost 30.000 people (Winsor and Kaufman, 2023). It is evident that Storm Daniel will surpass all previous records in terms of both casualties and monetary damages.

Medicanes, is a term used for storms that shows tropical storm characteristics near the southern coast of Europe. Although medicine does not have an official definition yet, today it is a significant source of natural disaster. These weather systems are typically not fully developed tropical cyclones, but have a warm core. They usually originate from cold-cored upper-level lows and rely on the Mediterranean Sea, which lacks extensive warm waters, to sustain them. Contrary to what the name suggests, only a small number of medicanes attain sustained winds comparable to a Category 1 hurricane.

If a medicane were to form outside of the Mediterranean, it would be classified as a subtropical storm and given a name by the National Hurricane Center. However, there is no officially designated agency responsible for naming subtropical or tropical storms in the Mediterranean. In the case of Storm Daniel, it was named by the meteorological service of Greece. This naming occurred as the storm was transitioning from a cold-core upper low into a medicane and causing destructive flooding in Greece and Turkiye last week.

The catastrophic flooding in Libya was partly influenced by the unfortunate occurrence of Storm Daniel making landfall directly over a small region of elevated terrain. However, this is only a portion of the overall explanation. Human-induced climate change is contributing to the problem by increasing the likelihood of tropical cyclones and similar storms generating heavy rainfall. This is due to the warming atmosphere, which has the capacity to draw more water vapor from the oceans, thereby exacerbating the intensity of these extreme weather events.



Damage caused by flood in Derna city of Libya on September 11, 2023, Photo Credit: New York Times

Was Libya Ready for the Storm?

Due to over a decade of political chaos, Libya has struggled to upkeep its infrastructure effectively. The nation is currently governed by two conflicting authorities, a western administration centered in Tripoli and a rival authority in the eastern part of the country,

responsible for cities such as Derna. Additionally, numerous armed groups hold significant influence. Authorities were cognizant of the structural deficiencies in the dams, making them susceptible to flooding. However, due to years of mismanagement by the government and intermittent civil conflict, insufficient maintenance measures were taken over time.

Most of the population of Libya resides in coastal regions, rendering the country particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of climate change and severe storms. In anticipation of the storm, the eastern government of Libya held a meeting to make necessary preparations. This meeting was recorded and broadcasted in the country's news media, where Osama Hamad, a prominent official, highlighted the authorities' heightened vigilance regarding the extreme weather event. However, residents of Derna reported receiving conflicting instructions regarding whether to evacuate the city (Abdulrahim, 2023).

Now, opposing authorities in Libya appear to be cooperating to a certain degree in coordinating search-and-rescue operations. Various medical teams, including those dispatched by the Red Crescent emergency service, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the Tripoli government, have been deployed in the affected region. Additionally, several humanitarian organizations have expressed their intentions to expand their assistance efforts in Libya.

During the previous week, President Biden announced that the United States would provide emergency funding to relief organizations and collaborate with Libyan authorities and the United Nations to offer humanitarian assistance. European nations like Britain, France, and Germany have also expressed their willingness to send humanitarian aid.

Aftermath

Thousands of bodies reportedly still remain under the rubble, and local teams need assistance to continue ongoing identification, documentation, and burial services, as well as manage the risk of future health outbreaks or waterborne diseases. What is also a problem is that there are a number of refugees from other parts of Africa in Libya, especially in this coastal town, making identification of the deceased and missing more difficult. As a result of the flood, over 47,000 people have been displaced. Further humanitarian aid and assistance is needed as the devastated city of Derna will need to rebuild itself out of the rubble.

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