The Kosi Disaster: Millions Flooded Out

by Ann Kathrin Schneider

Just as Hurricane Katrina caused levees in the Mississippi Delta to breach in August 2005, flooding large parts of New Orleans, this year's monsoon has breached embankments on the powerful Kosi River, flooding out three million people and killing at least 2,000 in Bihar, India and in eastern Nepal. After breaching its embankments on August 18, the Kosi took a path it had abandoned 200 years ago, 100 km from its channeled course, drowning hundreds of villages and fields in its way.

Experts note that this year's monsoon was not especially powerful, and that the embankment system failed in part because of heavy siltation building up within the embanked river channel. Compounding the problem was poor maintenance of the system.

The ongoing Kosi disaster bears another sad similarity to New Orleans in 2005: relief efforts in Bihar, one of the poorest regions in India, have been painfully slow, and aid workers are unable to provide safe drinking water, food, bedding or medicine to the thousands who have made it to the refugee camps. In the crowded camps, officials fear outbreaks of disease. Making things worse, women at the relief camps are facing sexual harassment. Authorities admit that they are struggling to cope with the situation.

Santosh Jha of Bihar said: "I have never seen so many dead bodies the way I have witnessed in past seven days. Would you believe if I say that till now I must have come across 250 bodies of all ages?"

The breaches of the Kosi embankment are the latest signs that conventional flood-control measures too often do not control floods, but worsen them. The floods from the Kosi embankment failures were more powerful than floods caused by unconstrained rivers, because the embankments increased the speed and power of the river's flow.

The Kosi River disaster is unfortunately not an isolated incident. Himanshu Thakkar, of South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People, says, "Over the years, India has seen its flood damages increase, at the same time that the total area supposedly protected by flood-control engineering projects has grown. It is noteworthy that most of these high flood events occurred after the flood control projects were in place."

The breaching of embankments cause extremely destructive floods because they usually happen without warning and create fast-moving flood waves. In contrast, "soft-path" flood risk management emphasizes preparedness over "flood protection" engineering of rivers. Flood risk management assumes that floods will happen and that we need to learn to live with them as best we can, reducing their speed, size and duration where possible and doing our best to protect our most valuable assets. Flood management assumes that all flood-protection infrastructure can fail and that this failure must be planned for. It is also based on an understanding that floods are not inherently bad – and indeed that floods are essential for the health of riverine ecosystems.

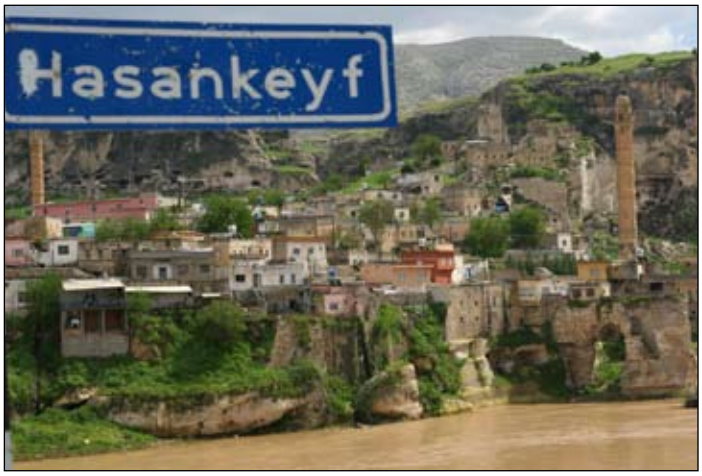
Says Thakkar, "Some key areas that must be addressed in India include sustaining and improving natural systems' ability to absorb floodwaters; improving the maintenance of existing flood infrastructure rather than spending money on new dams and embankments; undertaking a credible and participatory performance appraisal of existing infrastructure, and removing embankments that are found to be ineffective; and producing transparent disaster management plans intended to be implemented in a participatory way. Perhaps most importantly, India needs to assess the potential impacts of climate change on rainfall and on the performance of flood-related infrastructure, and begin planning for the necessary adaptation to the changing climate." ●

Ilisu Interview *continued*

WRR: What major challenges do you face?

EA: We must increase the awareness of affected people, build faith that their resistance has a chance to be successful and activate them. They must be the propagators of the campaign.

A second challenge is to lead a strong, strategic and long-term campaign that also has international dimensions. This has not happened in our region concerning environmental or social issues. Due to the unsolved Kurdish question and conflict and the civil war in the 1990s, this was impossible. There was much suppression by Turkish security forces.



Another challenge is the general prejudices of many parts of Turkish society against the Kurdish people. That's why the major Turkish press, Turkish organizations and Turkish artists do not support our campaign significantly. In the past two to three years, the Turkish press has written reasonably about the Ilisu project, but that is not enough to be successful against the Turkish government. However, since the well-known group The Nature Organization (Doga Dernegi) started a campaign against the Ilisu Dam, the Turkish public has started paying more attention.

WRR: An Iraqi expert recently said the Ilisu Dam will dramatically reduce the Tigris River's flow, depriving the city of Mosul of about half of its summer water supply. Can you talk about the impacts of the dam on Iraq?

EA: The Ilisu reservoir and other planned reservoirs will be able to store the entire annual flow of the Tigris from Turkey to Iraq. Iraq relies on water from the Tigris River for irrigation and for drinking supply for cities like Mosul and Baghdad.

International law requires that Turkey consult with Syria and Iraq, negotiate and come to an agreement before implementing any large projects on the Tigris River. Such an agreement is still missing.

Turkey and Iraq are situated in a politically unstable region. Even in times of peace, allowing a state to wield power over water increases tensions between neighboring countries. ●

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