

At least 75 killed, more than 100 others missing in Brazil floods



People wade through flood waters in Canoas, at the Rio Grande do Sul state, Brazil, May 5, 2024. REUTERS/Amanda Perobelli

Brasilia, May 6 (RHC)-- Massive floods in Brazil's southern Rio Grande do Sul state have killed at least 75 people over the last seven days, and another 103 were reported missing, local authorities have said.

Damage from the rains also forced more than 88,000 people from their homes, state civil defence authorities said on Sunday. Approximately 16,000 took refuge in schools, gymnasiums and other

temporary shelters.

The floods left a wake of devastation, including landslides, washed-out roads and collapsed bridges across the state. Operators reported electricity and communications cuts. More than 800,000 people are without a water supply, according to the civil defence, which cited figures from water company Corsan.

"I repeat and insist: the devastation to which we are being subjected is unprecedented," state Governor Eduardo Leite said on Sunday morning. He had previously said that the state will need a "kind of 'Marshall Plan' to be rebuilt".

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva visited Rio Grande do Sul for a second time on Sunday, accompanied by Defense Minister Jose Mucio, Finance Minister Fernando Haddad and Environment Minister Marina Silva, among others. The leader and his team surveyed the flooded streets of the state capital, Porto Alegre, from a helicopter.

"We need to stop running behind disasters. We need to see in advance what calamities might happen and we need to work," President Lula told journalists afterwards.

The Guaiba River reached a record level of 5.33 m (17.5 feet) on Sunday morning, surpassing levels seen during a historic 1941 deluge, when the river reached 4.76 m (15.6 feet).

During Sunday mass at the Vatican, Pope Francis said he was praying for the state's population. "May the Lord welcome the dead and comfort their families and those who had to abandon their homes," he said.

The downpour started on Monday last week and was expected to last through Sunday. In some areas, such as valleys, mountain slopes and cities, more than 300mm (11.8 inches) of rain fell in less than a week, according to Brazil's National Institute of Meteorology, known by the Portuguese acronym INMET.

The heavy rains were the fourth such environmental disaster in the state in a year, following floods in July, September and November 2023 that killed 75 people.

Weather across South America is affected by the climate phenomenon El Nino, a periodic, naturally occurring event that warms surface waters in the Equatorial Pacific region. In Brazil, El Nino has historically caused droughts in the north and intense rainfall in the south.

This year, the impacts of El Nino have been particularly dramatic, with a historic drought in the Amazon. Scientists say extreme weather is happening more frequently due to human-caused climate change. "These tragedies will continue to happen, increasingly worse and more frequent," said Suely Araujo, a public policy coordinator at the Climate Observatory, a network of dozens of environmental and social groups.

Brazil needs to adjust to the effects of climate change, she said in a statement, referring to a process known as "adaptation."

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