

Lightning and heavy rains kill at least 36 in India

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Lightning strikes over residential apartments during a thunderstorm on the outskirts of the Indian capital, New Delhi [File: Prakash Singh/AFP]

New Delhi, September 25 (RHC)-- Hazardous weather has killed at least 36 people in northern India over the past 24 hours, including 12 who died after being struck by lightning. Across the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, 24 people died after their homes collapsed during unrelenting rains, Relief Commissioner Ranvir Prasad said.

Mohamed Usman, 15, was on his friend's roof in the city of Prayagraj when lightning struck on Friday evening, killing him instantly. His friend Aznan, who goes by one name, was injured and is being treated in a hospital. "As soon as they set foot on the roof they were hit by lightning and my son died," said Mohammad Ayub, Usman's father.

Officials said 39 people in the state have died from lightning in the last five days, prompting the state government to issue new guidelines for how people can protect themselves during a thunderstorm.

Lightning strikes are common during India's monsoon season, which runs from June to September. Colonel Sanjay Srivastava, whose organisation Lightning Resilient India Campaign works with the Indian Meteorological Department, said deforestation, depletion of bodies of water, and pollution all contribute to climate change, which leads to more lightning.

Global warming has also increased the frequency of lightning, said Sunita Narain, director general at the Centre for Science and Environment. A 1-degree-Celsius (1.8-degree-Fahrenheit) rise in temperature increases lightning by 12 times. Thunderbolts contain as much as a billion volts of electricity and can cause immense damage to buildings when they hit.

There has been a 34-percent rise in lightning strikes across India over the past year, which has caused deaths to increase. About 2,500 people die in lightning strikes around India each year, according to government figures, compared with just 45 in the United States.

Last year, a herd of 18 wild Asiatic elephants was found dead in India's northeastern state of Assam, possibly because of a huge lightning strike. Evidence suggests lightning strikes are also becoming more common in urban areas – a particular concern in India, where the city population is forecast to rise dramatically in the coming years.

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