

UN says climate change causes two million deaths in 50 years; with poor suffering most

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People wade through floodwaters in the aftermath of Tropical Cyclone Freddy in Phalombe, southern Malawi, on March 18, 2023 [File: Thoko Chikondi/AP]

United Nations, May 22 (RHC)-- Extreme weather has caused the deaths of 2 million people and \$4.3 trillion in economic damage over the past half a century, a report by the United Nations finds. According to the new figures published on Monday from the UN's World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), 11,778 weather-related disasters have occurred from 1970 to 2021, and they have surged over that period.

The report found that more than 90 percent of deaths reported worldwide due to these disasters took place in developing countries. "The most vulnerable communities unfortunately bear the brunt of weather, climate and water-related hazards," WMO chief Petteri Taalas said in a statement.

Cyclone Mocha, which wreaked havoc in Myanmar and Bangladesh last week, exemplified this reality, Taalas said. The severe storm "caused widespread devastation, ... impacting the poorest of the poor", he said.

But the WMO also said improved early warning systems and coordinated disaster management had significantly reduced human casualties. Taalas pointed out that during disasters similar to Mocha in the past, "both Myanmar and Bangladesh suffered death tolls of tens and even hundreds of thousands of people." Myanmar's military government has put the death toll from the latest cyclone at 145, but there are fears the number is higher.

In a 2021 report covering disaster-linked deaths and losses from 1970 to 2019, the agency had pointed out that at the beginning of the period, the world saw more than 50,000 such deaths each year. By the 2010s, the disaster death toll had dropped to below 20,000 annually.

And in its update of that report, the WMO said Monday that 22,608 disaster deaths were recorded globally in 2020 and 2021 combined. "Thanks to early warnings and disaster management these catastrophic mortality rates are now thankfully history," the report said. "Early warnings save lives."

The UN has launched a plan to ensure all nations are covered by disaster early warning systems by the end of 2027. To date, only half of the world's countries have such systems in place.

The WMO, meanwhile, warned that while deaths have plunged, the economic losses incurred in weather-related disasters have soared. The agency previously recorded economic losses had increased sevenfold from 1970 to 2019, rising from \$49 million per day during the first decade to \$383 million per day in the final one.

Developed nations accounted for more than 60 percent of losses due to weather, climate and water disasters, but in more than four-fifths of cases, the economic losses for each disaster were equivalent to less than 0.1 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).

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