




TEACHERS' NOTES
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Global express

The rapid response information series for schools
on world events in the news

Floods

 What causes a flood?

 How do people live with flooding?

 Can people prepare?

BANGLADESH IS EXPERIENCING the worst floods in living memory. But it is not alone - Mexico, China and Belgium are currently coping with the effects of severe flooding. Many countries, including the UK, are regularly hit by floods.

This edition of **Global express** looks at the causes, consequences and myths that surround floods.

What is **Global express**?

Global express helps you teach about topical global issues and events.

Contains

Instant photocopiable classroom activities for 8 to 14 year olds

Key Stage 2

- Carry out a local water audit
- Build a model school on stilts
- Follow a paper boat down the Ganges

Key Stage 3

- Map floods around the world
- Discuss the causes and effects of recent floods
- Role play a village meeting on flood prevention

Curriculum

- Ideas for literacy hour
- Geography
- English
- Technology

Causes and consequences

Can you survive when floodwaters engulf at least a third of your country? For some people floods occupy a unique position in their culture and economy, bringing benefits to their land, crops and lives.

Most years floods are a normal part of life in Bangladesh but when they rise to unexpected levels they can bring disaster. Saleem Samad from Bangladesh described a typical scene to *Global express*. "Out of my window I can see people wading waist high in water with their children and possessions in search of a safe haven."

Already in Bangladesh more than 1200 people have died, not only by drowning but also from snake bites and electrocution from floating power cables. If floodwater remains, exposure to germs in the floodwater often means diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery and malaria develop. In the future there may also be food and water shortages because of ruined crops and polluted drinking water. Saleem added sadly, "Death and disease will be a constant companion for Bangladeshi children in the months to come."

Natural and man-made

Freshwater floods occur when a watershed, an area of land that drains into a river or stream, receives so much water that it cannot drain into the soil quickly enough to take the water away. Bangladesh itself is criss-crossed by three mighty rivers, the Ganges, the Jamuna and the Meghna.

Most floods follow heavy rain or melting snow, frozen ground and already high river levels - these factors can determine whether a flood is major or minor. The floods in Bangladesh began through a combination of heavy monsoon rains flooding the rivers and abnormally high tides in the Bay of Bengal preventing floodwater from running off the land and into the sea.

The floods have now lasted over two months. "Monsoon clouds will continue to shed rain drops till mid October," says Saleem anxiously.

But the likelihood of flooding can be increased by human activities too. In China, the current floods have been blamed on too many trees being cut down, stripping the land bare of the vital top soil which slows and drains water.

In built-up areas with a lot of concrete roads and houses, there are fewer places for water to go and less soil for water to drain into. So planners in cities prone to flooding have to develop ways of channelling water to cope with potential floods. In both China and Bangladesh they have tried to solve the problem (for example by building storm drains), but with only partial success.

After it hits

A flood becomes a disaster when people cannot cope with its effects in both the short and long term. Severe flooding can cause damage to people's homes and possessions. When there is enough warning people prepare, for example moving food, water and livestock onto the roof. "People in the rural areas know how to live with flooding, they have learned from their ancestors and from their mothers and they try to keep their smiles" explains Saleem. But people cannot stay on their roofs forever and if their homes are washed away they may have to move to official shelters. Often these are too small and disease spreads - at one Bangladesh shelter over 2,000 people shared only three toilets.

People in the West who suffer the consequences of flooding can often claim insurance to cover the cost of loss and damage. Poorer people in countries of the South have mostly to rely on their own resources to repair damage and replace possessions.

Quotes...

"Among all natural disasters floodings are the most significant cause of losing lives. They are increased by the after-effects of diseases and starvation."

UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs.

"Because of the abundance of water, fishermen like myself were able to catch three to four times as many fish as in previous years."

Bangladeshi fisherman,
Ishmail Hossain Khandaker.

"We lost everything. We have even lost our dead,"

A man quoted in the Mexican newspaper

La Jornada, 15/9/98.

"Barshas (normal floods) are the lifeblood of agriculture."

Mofizuddin Sonar, farmer.

"People's ability to survive natural disasters is directly related to their poverty."

Kevin Watkins, Oxfam,
The Guardian, 19/9/98.

In developing countries, flooded roads and railways, destroyed buildings and torn down phone lines mean that people find it difficult to move around or work but normal life goes on as far as possible. "I can see that many boats are now taking responsibility for moving commuters - actually this means it is easier, quieter and quicker to move around compared to when our streets are full of noisy buses," comments Saleem.

However, the financial effect on a developing country's economy can be disastrous. The UN Office for Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has estimated that Bangladesh will need contributions of around \$US 220 million just for relief over the next four months.



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