

2017 Sierra Leone mudslides

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Early in the morning on August 14, 2017, after three days of torrential rainfall, devastating floods and mudslides occurred in and around Sierra Leone's capital city, Freetown.

While the exact number is not yet certain, disaster-related deaths are estimated at approximately 400 with thousands of others missing and feared dead. More than 3,000 people were left homeless and hundreds of buildings damaged or destroyed by the mudslides. Occurring during a particularly wet rainy season, the severity of the disaster's devastation was exacerbated by the city's situation at or below sea level, poor infrastructure, and drainage system.

Local organizations and the American Red Cross handled the initial recovery efforts, and the international community has also been supplying aid.

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Impact

According to the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center, Sierra Leone had been in the midst of a particularly wet rainy season, with the capital city of Freetown, in the Western Area of the country, experiencing 41 inches (104 cm) of rainfall leading up to the mudslides since July 1, 2017 – nearly tripling the area's seasonal average.^[2] The Sierra Leone meteorological department did not issue a warning ahead of torrential rainfall to hasten evacuations from danger zones; from August 11 to 14, Freetown received three consecutive days of downpours, which led to severe flooding in the city and its surrounding suburbs.^[3] Flooding is an annual threat for the area: in 2015 floods killed 10 people and left thousands homeless.^{[4][5]}

Overlooking Freetown, Sugar Loaf mountain partially collapsed, triggering mudslides in the early morning of August 14 which damaged or completely submerged several houses and structures, killing residents – many still asleep – who were trapped inside. The Regent suburban district is considered to have endured the most devastation; a mountainous settlement 15 miles east of Freetown, Regent had been obliterated when nearby hillsides collapsed around 6:00 GMT.^{[4][6]} Other areas which reported serious damage include the settlements

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Location of Western Area in Sierra Leone

Date	14 August 2017
Time	Approx. 6:30am GMT (UTC+0:00)
Location	Western Area, Sierra Leone
Coordinates	8°26′2″N 13°13′22″W﻿ / ﻿8.43667°N 13.22278°W﻿ / 8.43667; -13.22278
Cause	Landslides due to heavy rain
Deaths	300-400+ ^[1]
Missing	600+ ^[1]
Property damage	3000+ homeless ^[1]

Motormeh, Kamayamah, Kaningo, Dworzak, New England, Kroobay, Mountain Cut, George Brook, Big Warf, and Wellington.^[7] Director Kelfa Karbo of the relief agency Street Child described a "domino effect" which resulted in structures demolishing other properties as the mudslides progressed.^[6]

Contributing factors

The severity of the destruction was exacerbated by a combination of factors. Freetown, a densely populated and congested city occupied by about 1.2 million people at the time of the disaster, resides at or below sea level, and is flanked by heavily-forested mountain ranges.^[8] It suffers from a long-term issue with poor urban development programs: "The government is failing to provide housing for the poorest in society", said Jamie Hitchen of the Africa Research Institute, while noting attention to unregulated construction is only received after a crisis.^[6] The lack of enforcement of a moratorium led to the encroachment of flood plains by unorganized settlements and municipal works, resulting in narrower water passageways.^[8] In flooding events, Freetown's drainage systems are often blocked by discarded waste, especially in the city's more impoverished communities, contributing to higher levels of surface runoff.^[9]

The building of large residential homes in hillside areas and unrestricted deforestation weakened the stability of nearby slopes and incurred significant adverse soil erosion.^[9] Within a decade leading to the disaster, Sierra Leone lost approximately 800,000 hectares of forest cover – the country's civil war, fought between 1991 and 2002, is also a studied cause of deforestation. The nation's Environmental Protective Agency reported a reforestation mission in the region two weeks prior to the floods and mudslides which was ultimately unsuccessful.^[10]

Response

Exact numbers for the death toll are still uncertain but there are over 400 confirmed fatalities and thousands more are feared dead.^{[11][12]} Initial estimates placed the number at 205, but recognized the likelihood that the toll would rise with rescue efforts ongoing and about 600 people still missing. More than 3,000 people have been left homeless and hundreds of properties damaged or submerged by the mudslides and flooding.^{[13][14]}

Later in the day, President Ernest Bai Koroma made a public address to Sierra Leone in a national broadcast, declaring a state of emergency and the establishment of a relief centre in Regent.^[3] He urged the nation, still recovering from the aftermath of the Ebola outbreak, to remain unified: "Our nation has once again been gripped by grief. Many of our compatriots have lost their lives, many more have been gravely injured and billions of Leones' worth of property destroyed in the flooding and landslides that swept across some parts of our city".^[3] He also addressed the coordination of registries in Freetown that provide aid for residents left without shelter.^{[3][15]} On August 15, the president declared seven days of national mourning, which would take effect immediately.^[16]

Local organizations, military personnel, and the American Red Cross contributed to immediate excavation and recovery efforts, and they worked amid rainfall. People initially used their bare hands and shovels to dig through mud and debris where machines were not yet available. The Connaught Hospital mortuary in Freetown was overwhelmed by nearly 300 bodies in the first day alone, forcing workers to lay victims on floors and outside the building to be identified.^[12] Response teams were deployed to two public schools converted into displacement centres to distribute food, water, and medical supplies. By August 16, workers in Regent and Kaningo began constructing emergency latrines and a 10,000 liter water harvesting system.^[17]

Koroma made an appeal to the international community for relief: on August 15, Israel's envoy of food supplies, enough for about 10,000 meals, arrived – the first form of foreign aid to help address the crisis.^[18] In response to the disaster, the United Nations (UN) arranged contingency plans to mitigate potential outbreaks of waterborne diseases such as diarrhea and cholera, and is using radar imagery to assess which areas may be threatened by further mudslides or flooding.^{[19][20]} The UN's migration agency allocated \$150,000 in initial-response aid and mobilized personnel in Sierra Leone to assist in rescue operations, as well as distribute supplies to survivors.^[19] GlobalGiving has launched a relief fund to support emergency relief and long-term recovery efforts run by local organizations in Sierra Leone.^[21]

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