

FLOODS IN EUROPE JULY

While this book was being written, the newspapers and television were full of reports of exceptional flooding in the Czech Republic, Poland and Germany. Heavy rain from the beginning of July over the Krkonose and Jeseniky mountains on the Czech-Polish border caused floods on the Vistula, Oder and Neisse rivers, which flow northwards to the Baltic and on the Morava River that flows southwards through the north-east of the Czech Republic to join the Danube near Bratislava. By 9 July the Czech Government was announcing that almost a quarter of the country was affected, with thousands of families evacuated as the flood waters threatened to destroy their homes. Sixteen thousand people were evacuated from the Ostrava region when a reservoir had to be opened to avoid its collapse.

At the same time, north of the mountains in Poland, river levels up to 3 m above the alarm level were being recorded on the Oder, the Vistula and their tributaries. Forty thousand people were without electricity or drinking water and 6,000 had had to leave their homes. By 11 July, the number of evacuees in Poland had reached 40,000 and about 100 towns and villages were cut-off. The major city of Krakow on the Oder was bracing itself for the floods.

On 14 July, the Czech Civil Protection reported that 50,000 people had been evacuated from the severely affected regions of Bohemia and Moravia and that 29 people had died in the floods. Flood waters were starting to recede in the north-east and recovery was starting. Some 8,000 soldiers and Civil Protection personnel and 12,500 fire-fighters had been mobilized as well as many other rescuers. After this date the effects of the flood were concentrated in Poland and later in eastern Germany.

By 16 July it was becoming evident that the flood was a major event, the largest in the region for a century or longer. Its impact was being compared to that of the storm surge that struck the Netherlands, Belgium and the United Kingdom in 1953. River levels were still rising on the Oder, downstream of Wroclaw and on the Vistula. In all, some 320 towns in Poland were affected, to a greater or lesser degree, by the flooding.

The DHA situation report of 21 July noted that rains continued in western and south-western Poland along the Czech and German borders. Between 30 mm and 50 mm of rain had been forecast for the weekend. The death toll in Poland had now reached 49 and that in the Czech Republic 46. Of the 137,000 Poles who had been evacuated, 70,000 were still not able to return home. Newspaper reports noted that the regions touched by the flood were highly industrialized and that pollution from the factories had caused acid rain that damaged

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Floods, Oder river, Germany, July 1997.
Studio X/Stern. Dr J. Gebhardt

the forest cover on the mountains leading to increased runoff and floods. Factories that were flooded were releasing pollution into the flood water. Many farm animals (cattle, pigs and poultry) had been drowned. In addition to the economic loss, the safe disposal of the carcasses was required to prevent further contamination of the water. The Government of Poland re-allocated US\$ 1 billion of its budget for rehabilitation and offers of immediate assistance were pouring in from other countries. At about this time the first reports of flood damage in eastern Germany started appearing in the press and on television. The German town of Frankfurt an der Oder, on the Polish border below the confluence of the Neisse and the Oder was threatened by flooding.

The flood was now affecting three countries, the Czech Republic, Poland and Germany and there was need for coordination in flood-fighting, particularly in the release of water from reservoirs that could affect countries downstream. The rain continued causing a second, though smaller, wave of flooding. The death toll continued to rise to 128 (all three countries combined). A dyke collapsed on the German bank of the Oder and 2,300 people had to be evacuated. By 26 July the situation was said to be stable in Poland and the Czech Republic as the flood wave moved further downstream, though it was worsening in Germany.





Floods in Poland, July 1997.

DHA, S.

It will take some time to assess the full damage from these floods, but already Munich Re, the German reinsurance company has estimated them at US\$ 5 billion. For Poland and the Czech Republic in particular the effect on their economic growth will be marked. Some Czech economists believe it may reduce GDP by 0.5 per cent this year. There has also been political fall out. Rivers in flood are no respecters of political boundaries and coping with the flood has required close cross-border co-operation between the three countries.



Floods in Poland, July 1997.

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