

Kerala Witnesses the worst flood situation in Hundred Years

The state of Kerala has its worst flood situation since 1924. This small southern state of India had unusually heavy monsoon rains since July, which resulted in landslides in the hill districts and waterlogs in many districts of Kerala. Already by mid-July rescue teams have been operative and relief camps have been opened in several districts. For the first time in the history of Kerala all the 37 reservoirs /dams of Kerala had to be opened to release the excess water, which caused overflowing of rivers. Many rivers began to flow with thrice or more than their usual breadth, resulting in widespread flood in many rural as well as urban areas of the state. The Indian Meteorological Department declared Red Alert in all districts.

The flood has been literally devastating to the state, even to the extent of changing the very geographical configuration of the region. Rivers are not only overflowing; some of them have changed their direction. There were several landslides that washed away the entire families with their houses. In the district of Trichur, 19 people (out of which 15 Catholics of the Archdiocese of Trichur) from four families were washed away. An entire hill rushed over to their houses in few seconds. The transport and communication systems of the state are also ruthlessly affected. The Airport of Cochin had to be closed down, since it was filled with waters. It will take some more days to resume ordinary functions.

There were flash flooding in several regions for the first time in the lives of the inhabitants and hence, least prepared for such eventualities. People had to either flee from their houses bear-handed or had to climb up to higher planes or roof-tops. Many relief camps were opened, mostly in the schools and church premises. Many of the churches, presbyteries and schools run by the Church or other communities were converted to relief camps. The presbytery of a church (at Kuthiathode, Ernakulam) became the shelter for many and could not withstand the heavy current and was partially destroyed taking the lives of six people. The coastal belt of

Central Kerala is still under water. Pathanamthitta, Ernakulam and Trichur are the worst hit areas now. Before one week, the affected areas were Wynad, Idukky, Kannur, Pathanamthitta, Kottayam, and Thiruvananthapuram, Palghat districts.

The government is doing its best to tackle the rescue and relief operations. Army, Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard are deployed to assist the state in rescue operations. People of Kerala have flocked together to do their best part in the rescue operations. There were spontaneous overflow of helps at every nook and corner of Kerala. People have joined hands with each other irrespective of their religious and socio-political differences. The spontaneous initiative of the fishermen groups to reach out rescue operations in areas where coastal guards could not access.

The Catholic Church is fully involved in overcoming the present crisis. The dioceses, Religious, parishes and church organizations are fully engaged in the relief operations day and night. Many of the priests and the religious sisters are leading several camps along with people's representatives and government officials. The church agencies and the faithful at large provide food, clothing and shelter to the people in the relief camps. We are very happy to report that the relief camps and helps conducted by the Church is much appreciated by the affected people, although, as usual, much publicity is not given in media for the Church activities.

On 20 August, most of the rescue operations are to be completed. However, the western regions of Kerala are still affected by flood due to the slow intake of water to the sea. As a result, some rivers have even changed its direction, causing widespread damage to several villages and thousands of people displaced. Many villages in the central district of Trichur and southern region of Chengannoor are still flooded. The greatest challenge for Kerala would be to provide infra-structural facilities to the people affected when they go back to their own houses, either ravaged or wiped out. The government, NGOs and the Church have began

preparing long-term plans for rehabilitation with the help of the local and international agencies.

The Archdiocese of Trichur, as most of the other dioceses, is in the forefront with relief works. About 10 days back, relief materials from the Archdiocese were sent in trucks to Kuttanad and Wynad area. At that time Trichur was not heavily hit. But during last week, all the low areas were flooded. Many bridges were overblown. Many houses were sunk or destroyed due to heavy water flow. Flood affected also some churches to the extent that we could not celebrate Mass there even on last Sunday. Most of our parish halls, and schools and some presbyteries are still relief camps. Auxiliary Bishop Tony Neelankavil and myself personally visited several relief camps. I am happy to report that priests, sisters, seminarians and lay church leaders are in the forefront in the rescue works and relief activities. People, irrespective of caste and creed are helping us. Now we are distributing food items, clothes and other essentials to relief camps, families in affected areas. The Archbishop's house Trichur, today, is like a market with food and other essentials where many volunteers are working day and night preparing kits which are being distributed.

I had sent a letter to Ap. See, Nunciature and all bishops in India briefly narrating the situation in Kerala. I am happy to note that at the request of our Cardinals and Nuncio, Pope Francis has given a beautiful consoling message with prayers, on last Sunday, 19th Aug.

Please continue to pray for our State Kerala and do whatever help is possible for the rehabilitation of affected people.

Thanking you,

Mar Andrews Thazhath

Archbishop of Trichur