

15th August 2017

The Sierra Leone Mudslides and Floods: Implication to Human Security



Map Source: Aljazeera.com

Demographic Analysis

- Freetown, the Capital City of Sierra Leone is located in the Western Area with hills and valleys along the peninsular and its tributaries flowing into the Atlantic Ocean.
- A city that was founded to host around 500,000 people is now a home to more than 2 million people¹ mainly migrating from the countryside during and after the

country's civil conflict (1991-2002).

- Like most post-conflict cities, Freetown received thousands of migrants in search of safety, education, employment and other socio-economic reasons. As a result of limited space and overcrowding in the city centre, most of these migrants live in poorly constructed structures with limited regulations from the Ministry of Lands, Country Planning and Environment. In September 2015, communities along these hills and coastlines experienced mudslides and flooding with varying effects on lives and property.
- Similarly, in 2014, Freetown and especially these hillside and coastal communities were hardest hit by the Ebola epidemic² leaving more than 3,500 people dead.

INCIDENT PROFILE

On Monday, August 14, 2017, heavy rain in Freetown including Motema, Kroo Bay and Dwazack communities resulted in mudslides and torrential flood that killed over 312 residence, mostly women and children. It has forced the displacement of residence and destroyed properties. Media reports revealed that the death toll could increase as there were many people trapped underneath debris³.

RISKS ANALYSIS :

A significant percentage of affected communities in Freetown comprise of residence with poor economic means that live in squatter and weak constructed houses. These residential areas are situated on collapsible soils increasing risk of hazards from flooding. Collapsible soils appear to be strong and stable in their natural (dry) state, but rapidly consolidate under wetting. This can yield disastrous consequences for structures unwittingly built on such

¹ Population and Housing Census 2015

² Source: Malanie Mayhaw, "In a community ravaged by Ebola, sight of hope and continuing needs", October 2015.

³ Aljazeera, 14/08/2017



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deposits⁴. As these structures and communities are located on hillsides and coastlines, the integrity of the buildings are further challenged by poor drainage systems, ineffective waste management and lack of town planning. The indiscriminate depletion of the forest cover for settlement and other economic reasons occasioned by intense rainfall increase vulnerability of those communities to landslides and flooding. Consistently, in the last two years, these hillside and coastal communities have had incidents of mudslide, flooding and windstorm with fatalities, injuries and forced displacements. However, government efforts to evacuate or relocate these communities have proved unsuccessful. For instance, after the September 16th, 2015 landslide and flooding incidents, affected communities including Kroo Bay, Susan's Bay, Grafton, Regent, etc. were relocated to Mile 6 on the outskirts of Freetown but by November 2015, those relocated returned and began new settlements in the same localities. This suggests weakness on the part of the Lands and Environment Ministry and law enforcement agencies to ensure appropriate government's actions are adhered to and sustained. The severity of the recent mudslide and flooding in Freetown reawakens the necessity for action to prevent or mitigate a reoccurrence of similar disaster. The scale and impact of the disaster could be attributed to limited knowledge of disaster risk reduction strategies and resilient capacities by affected population. Without adequate emergency response to the current crisis, there is an increased likelihood of opportunistic disasters from possible outbreak of water-borne diseases such as cholera, typhoid etc. Therefore, this requires collective effort from the Disaster Management Department of the Office of National Security (ONS), emergency management and aid agencies.

MECHANISMS FOR INTERVENTION

- The affected areas have been cordoned by security operatives and rescue operation is underway with support from community volunteers and non-governmental organisations.
- The ONS and partners have set up emergency centres in the city and together with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), Sierra Leone Red Cross Society (SLRC) and other aid agencies evacuation of victims of the disaster including the dead and injured persons is underway.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Government through the ONS should issue continuous early warning alerts and ensure communities with similar vulnerabilities are evacuate immediately;
- The Government through appropriate Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) should set up an expert investigation to assess the immediate and remote causes of the disasters and proper action taken to enforce housing regulations policies to forestall future occurrence.

⁴ C.C. Swan. Foundation on Weak/or Compressible Soils. Foundation Engineering, The University of Iowa



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- The Government through the Ministry of Lands, Country Planning and the Environment and ONS should review or reassess the vulnerability levels of communities at risk of natural and/or man-made disasters across Sierra Leone to inform prevention and mitigation strategies;
- Appropriate government, civil society, academic institutions and the media should step up community awareness education on disaster risk reduction and mitigation strategies across areas, chiefdoms and districts vulnerable to flood to improve their resilience to the hazard;
- Investment by the State to improve forecasting, disaster preparation, and emergency response should be considered a priority for Western Urban and Western Rural Districts;
- Health authorities and aid agencies should complement the rescue operations with disease prevention and mitigation measures.