

South Korea - The Heaviest Rainfall in 115 Years and Record-breaking Heat Waves: Climate Disaster Caused by Growing Inequality

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For several days from 8 August, heavy rains fell continuously mainly in the Seoul metropolitan area, flooding homes, roads and subway stations of Seoul. By 10 August, at least 11 people had been killed, about 570 had temporarily lost their homes, and seven others were missing as a result of the floods. On 15 August, two sisters in their 40s and a 13-year-old girl were found dead in their semi-basement flat.

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Even before the heaviest rainfall in 115 years and floods, South Korea and surroundings had been experiencing unprecedented extreme weather such as abnormally high temperatures, typhoons, droughts, heavy snow, and cold waves over the past few years. It is one of the obvious consequences of global warming. The disasters made many Koreans realize that “serious climate change” is not someone else’s problem, but their own. [1] They will also cause enormous damage not only to every sector of human activity but also to natural ecosystems.

Serious situation on the Korean Peninsula and its surroundings

The IPCC report predicted that temperatures would reach 1.5C above 1850-1900 levels by 2040. [2] The report also predicted that there will be an increasing occurrence of some extreme events unprecedented in the observational record even at warming of 1.5C. [3]

As already mentioned, extreme weather has become ever more severe in South Korea and surroundings. South Korea’s National Institute of Meteorological Sciences (NIMS) announced that the future temperature of South Korea would be 7 degrees higher than the current state. NIMS also expected that there will be days when the temperatures exceed 45 degrees. [4] In addition, the climate change assessment report published by NIMS in 2020 analysed that the global impacts made by climate change have become even more severe. [5]

China, which borders the Korean Peninsula, experienced its worst heat wave since records began in 1961 this summer. [6]. Japan experienced its worst heat wave ever recorded since records began in 1875. [7] The unprecedented current situation was already predicted several years ago. According

to an IPCC report, global surface temperature was 1.09C higher in the decade between 2011-2020 than between 1850-1900. And the past five years have been the hottest since 1850. The rate of sea level rise has almost tripled compared with 1901-1971. [8] There is an urgent need to implement the plans prepared by Planning climate change risk monitoring and assessment not only on the Korean Peninsula and surroundings but worldwide.

Human-made disasters at semi-basement flats in Seoul metropolitan area

The record rainfall pounded most of the Seoul metropolitan was reportedly caused by global warming. And it was also a man-made disaster. As before, the disaster once again slammed into the lower class in social apathy. The semi-basement flat in South Korea is a symbol of social disparity, increasing inequality, and poverty. [9] It was built by Park Chung-hee for military purposes. Since the assassination plot of then President Park Chung-hee in 1968, updated building codes required all newly built low-rise apartment buildings to have basements to serve as bunkers in case of a national emergency. [10] Originally, renting out underground rooms was prohibited. But the government legalized such underground spaces for living, prioritizing capital over human life.

Semi-basement flats are dim and hot in the summer with low ceilings and lack of sunlight, which can lead to mildew contamination in high humidity. This incident was as if disaster struck against the lower class with inequality in social and economic relations. On the other hand, South Korean President Yun Seok-yeol did nothing while staying in a luxury high-rise apartment. Heavy rain was predicted from noon on the day of the flood, but he did not take any emergency measures. He didn't make his first statement until after midnight. South Korea is now in a chaotic condition or in a state of anarchy.

Poverty and ecological crisis caused by impersonal and destructive logic of capitalism

Regarding the heavy rain in Seoul metropolitan area, the South Korean media emphasized "record-setting heavy rain". And the regional heat waves in China and Japan this summer were the strongest since complete meteorological observation records started in 1961 and 1875 respectively. This year's extreme weather in South Korea and its surroundings is clearly one of the consequences of global warming. The record rainfall that pounded South Korea [11] and unrivaled heat waves in China and Japan may increase in intensity and occur frequently in the future.

Governments and corporations have failed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and destroyed ecosystems through over-exploitation of resources and ceaseless production of useless commodities. Then climate disasters have been repeated. It is clear that we cannot solve the climate issue by "green" economy and market-based strategies led by governments and corporations. Global warming, the main cause of climate change, is occurred not only by natural causes but also man-made causes. Its effects are growing and hitting the poor. And the rich are making things worse. In previous disasters, it was socially vulnerable who had suffered the most. And such people do not have the means to restore themselves when their homes and life are destroyed. This year's floods in South Korea are also characterized by severely disabled people among the victims. The South Korean government has failed to take care of the severely disabled and has imposed the burden on their families. [12]

On the other hand, the government has given tax cuts for a privileged few over the past five years. And corporations have grown in the constant pursuit of criminal profits through capitalist

productivism. Capitalism, which has regarded humans as tools for capital accumulation, has also plundered nature. The impersonal and destructive logic of capitalism is the main cause of poverty and ecological crisis. Governments' temporary and ad hoc policies are inadequate to avoid catastrophic climate change. We must immediately clear up the contradictions in structurally unequal societies: the plundered poor who will pay the price of environmental disaster.

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Footnotes

[1] In recent years, Korean and Japanese media have raised concerns about public consciousness that climate change is someone else's problem.

[2] IPCC, 8 October 2018, "Global Warming of 1.5°C an IPCC special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty". Discussions prior to publication of the IPCC report were conducted at a conference held in South Korea.

[3] IPCC Working Group I, 9 August 2021, "Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis".

[4] 기상청 (National Institute of Meteorological Sciences), 2020, "글로벌 기후 전망 보고서 (Global Climate Change Prospect Report)"

[5] 기상청 (National Institute of Meteorological Sciences), 2020, "한국 기후 변화 평가 보고서 2020 (Korea Climate Change Assessment Report 2020)" 기상청 (National Institute of Meteorological Sciences), 2020, "한국 기후 변화 평가 보고서 2020 (Korea Climate Change Assessment Report 2020)"

[6] 인민일보 (People's Daily Online), 18 August 2022, "중국에서 1961년 이래 가장 강한 고온과 열파 발생 (National Climate Center: The comprehensive intensity of high temperature and heat wave in China has reached the strongest since 1961)."

[7] BBC News, 29 June 2022, "Japan swelters in its worst heatwave ever recorded".

[8] IPCC Working Group I, 9 August 2021, "Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis".

[9] As the movie *Parasite* depicts the life of semi-basement flat, South Korea is a super-disparate society with a large gap between the rich and the poor.

[10] Julie Yoon, BBC News, 10 February 2020, "Parasite: The real people living in Seoul's basement apartments".

[11] 권운태 (Gwon Won-tae), 조앙일보 (JoongAng Ilbo Co., Ltd.), 15 August 2022, "100년 만에, 더 강하고 더 자주 (Heavy rain for the first time in 100 years, which may become stronger and more frequent)".

[12] Disabled people have sought compensation for their rights for decades. However, what the government has done is the delay in guaranteeing housing rights on the pretext of budget deficit.