

Link to article:

<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/natural-disasters/landslide-in-cameroon-capital-kills-at-least-30-ministers-blame-residents-for-construction-in-floodplain-region-92223>

Landslide in Cameroon capital kills at least 30; ministers blame residents for construction in floodplain region

by Ngala Killian Chimtom on 10 October 2023

Dam in Mbangkolo burst after hours of heavy rainfall; locals say poor maintenance to blame



The rush of flood waters and debris wiped out at least 30 homes in Mbankolo neighbourhood, said locals. Photo: Ngala Killian Chimtom

At least 30 people have died and 20 have been wounded following a landslide that ripped through the Mbangkolo neighbourhood in Cameroon's capital Yaounde on October 8, 2023.

The landslide was caused due to several hours of heavy rains that led to the collapse of a century-old colonial-era dam located on the Mbangkolo hills in Yaounde. A wave of water was released from a human-made lake that flattened buildings, uprooted trees and swept away dozens of people.

The rush of flood waters and mud wiped out at least 30 homes in the neighbourhood, said a local leader in the Mbankolo neighbourhood Joseph Assola.

Ymele Guy, a landlord in the locality, told this reporter that six people who were staying in his compound died, including a six-year-old boy. The child's parents had rented an apartment owned by Guy and had moved in just three weeks ago.

"I was sleeping next to my wife and woke up instinctively. I went out of the house and couldn't believe my eyes. I rushed back to the house and found my wife almost drowning and managed to save her," he said.

He also managed to rescue four children, but the fifth was ripped out of his arms by the rushing flood waters.

Another resident Jouego Catherine said her pregnant sister was still missing and likely buried under the debris. "She got married in April and lived with her in-laws — all seven died in the house. Five corpses have been recovered so far, but two people haven't been found yet — my sister and a young girl," Catherine said.

About 15 children attending the birthday party of a friend died after the house was also swept away in the flood. "They all perished here — these young children," said Josiane Mbock, another resident.

The roaring waters sounded like a plane crashing, said resident Chamagne Virginie. "I ran outside and saw a wall of water. My younger brother was nearly swept away but he luckily managed to hold on to a pillar. His wife and three children were taken by the flood," she said.

Bouna Serge had to rush home from a meeting when his children called him to say the house was sinking. "Parts of the house have been destroyed, but I count myself lucky. My daughters were out of the house when the flood began and managed to flee to safety. My son was sleeping and woke up when the house began to fill with water; he climbed on the roof of the house and only came down when the water level dropped," he said.

The bodies of the victims are at the mortuaries of several hospitals in the area. Those hurt will be treated for free, announced The Minister of Territorial Administration Paul Atanga Nji.



Paul Atanga Nji and Celestine Ketcha Courtes blamed the locals for living in the floodplain region. Photo: Ngala Killian Chimtom

President Paul Biya has ordered rescue efforts like distributing mattresses and blankets for the survivors, Nji added. “The Head of State and his wife extend their heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families,” he said.

The minister also urged residents to evacuate the risky zones, stating the houses were built in a dangerous zone. “We will step up the campaign to make sure that all these risky areas are evacuated for the common good,” he said.

“It’s a very sad situation and we are here to express the heartfelt condolences of the Head of State to all the bereaved families. At the same time, we need to sensitise the population against construction in these risky areas because the laws of the country already prevent us from building there,” Nji stated.

The minister also claimed the locals continue with construction in dangerous areas like swampy areas or slopes despite recommendations by authorities against it, leading to such tragedies.

Minister of Housing and Urban Development Celestin Ketcha Courtes also blamed the locals, saying the disaster could have been avoided if the population had listened to advice from weather experts.

“This happened because people occupied the water bed (the river floodplain). We all know that no building can hold the strength of water,” she said.

“The meteorological department warned of heavy rains in Yaounde this year. Following that publication, I called on local authorities to do everything possible to ensure that people get out of riverbeds to allow the water to flow naturally. Nobody heeded that call,” Courtes said.

However, Guy said the embankment was poorly maintained, which led to the tragedy. The country had been a German colony from 1884 until the First World War, with the dam being built over a century ago.

Discussion Questions:

Do you think the benefits outweigh the risks of living on a floodplain?

How would the impacts and responses differ if the landslide occurred in a developed country?