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Nepal Disaster: One of Many Eastern Himalayan Ecological Crises

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Nepal's devastating floods reopen the question of who bears responsibility for climate-change induced crises and who pays.

Weeks after disaster struck Nepal, the country continues to struggle to rescue its people and faces the daunting prospect of reconstruction. The floods and resulting destruction were as much man-made as natural. As Nesrine Malik writes in [The Guardian](#), "Climate breakdown is happening on one Earth, but two different worlds." She points out how climate change affects different countries in different ways; certain nations have the wealth and infrastructure to 'bounce back' better than the others. Rebuilding from the damage it might require up to a tenth of its entire country's economy, she estimates.

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The crisis has brought attention to the vulnerability of the eastern Himalayas and the question of who pays the costs. The region spanning Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Tibet, and Arunachal Pradesh has been identified as an environmental hazard zone. Climate change and fast melting glaciers have heightened the danger. Since 2000, 85 major incidents of [Glacial Lake Outburst Floods \(GLOF\)](#) have been recorded across the Himalayan range. Glacial lakes within India saw a 33.7% increase in total surface area between 2011 and 2024, a sign of melting ice, according to data from the Central Water Commission. A study conducted by [ISRO](#) reveals that out of 2,431 large Himalayan lakes, tracked via satellite archives over a period of four decades, 676 lakes expanded significantly. Of this, 601 lakes (89%) grew more than double in total water volume.

The dangers have come home in the past. A [GLOF in Sikkim in 2023](#) caused a breach in the Chungthang Dam, in North Sikkim. This was one of the state's biggest natural disasters since massive floods in 1968. The GLOF and flash floods resulted in over 90 people dead and many more missing. Over 22,000 people were displaced across the span of Teesta. Accelerated melting of glaciers caused by rising regional temperature has resulted in the lake growing over 45% between 2016 and 2023, steadily applying pressure on the dam.

Only a few years before, 2016, the then chief minister of Sikkim inaugurated as a tourist attraction, [Mantam Lake](#), formed by the debris of a massive landslide that blocked the flow of Roungyoung Chu in Sikkim. (Never mind that the [landslide](#) had washed away homes and bridges and cut off about 13 villages.) This site, which should have been a warning, was turned into a celebration.

The collective ignorance that we have all been a part of, voluntarily or involuntarily, has made us pause and reflect, momentarily, over the past week as the death toll in Nepal rises.

Who Cleans the Mess?

Climate change from anthropogenic activity is the root cause of the latest Himalayan disaster. Nepal as a country contributes to less than [0.1% of global greenhouse gas](#) emission in comparison to the US at 11%. And yet, today, over thousands are dead and a bigger number missing, in Nepal. Prime Minister Balendra Shah has held big nations like USA, China and India responsible for the floods as they are some of the major emitters of greenhouse gases historically. For good reason, he has demanded 'climate compensation' from the superpowers and has declared that Nepal does not require anyone's charity anymore, but people must be held accountable.

In [Ecofeminisms](#), Vandana Shiva and Maira Miess argue the idea of progress and development rests on the violent domination of the "other". It was the constant creation of this other and the accelerated rate supported by the free and open market that squeezed its way in through the 1990s that led to a first acknowledgment and intervention. In 1997, at the third Conference of Parties (COP3) held at Kyoto, Japan, 84 countries from around the world signed a treaty to address the rising climate crisis across the globe. Over time the number of countries went up to 192.

The legally binding international treaty pointed out the disparity in bearing the brunt of environmental disasters caused by rising climate change concerns. It operated based on Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) which highlighted and stressed on the need for developed countries to bear the primary responsibility of historical carbon emissions. In simple terms, the developed countries had

to clean the mess they created.

The treaty, targeted at reducing carbon emission and reducing ecological-economic disparity, remained on paper for a long time. For instance, the United States of America, which is the largest historical contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions, never ratified the Kyoto Protocol, and hence never being legally bound by it.

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The top-down model proposed by the [Kyoto Protocol](#) saw very little support and participation from global superpowers. The Paris Agreement in 2014 witnessed a more flexible, bottom-up replacement where it was decided that all nations would set Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to deal with greenhouse gas emissions. This in itself can be described as a failure to address the issue of accountability. In 2026, the UN acknowledged that the target set in the 2014 Paris Agreement is 'officially unachievable'.

The principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities was not generosity. In 1992, at the Earth summit in Rio de Janeiro, many developing countries challenged a plan that would have held all countries to the same standard of emission reduction regardless of who had been emitting, and for how long. What followed was three decades of creative erosion of that principle. The United States, which has contributed approximately 25% of all cumulative global CO2 emissions since industrialisation, never ratified the Kyoto Protocol and withdrew-for the second time in 2026-from the Paris Agreement. (The Paris Agreement of 2015 replaced Kyoto's binding targets with voluntary Nationally Determined Contributions, widening participation at the cost of enforceability.) Nepal adds under 0.1% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Under the Paris Agreement's own wording, Nepal is meeting its share.

Prime Minister Shah's demand for compensation, not for aid is a distinction that matters. Aid is discretionary, while compensation implies obligation. It suggests that something was taken or destroyed and must be returned or paid for. For years, the main story in the Global South has been framed as a humanitarian crisis. It leads to aid and donations, not invoices.

The [Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage](#), the Santiago Network, COP27 fund all represent a small step in the direction Shah is pointing towards. Shifting from a humanitarian to a legal and political frame is difficult precisely since it confronts the authors of a crisis they have termed collective, inevitable, and natural. The Nepal flood of 2026 did not fit any of those labels.

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