



## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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### 2010: Deadliest for natural disasters in a generation

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*Earthquakes, heat waves, floods, volcanoes, super typhoons, blizzards, landslides and droughts killed at least a quarter of a million people in 2010.*

This was the year the Earth struck back. Earthquakes, heat waves, floods, volcanoes, super typhoons, blizzards, landslides and droughts killed at least a quarter of a million people in 2010 - the deadliest year in more than a generation. More people were killed worldwide by natural disasters this year than have been killed in terrorism attacks in the past 40 years combined.

#### How deadly

Nearly 260,000 people died in natural disasters in 2010 through Nov. 30, compared with 15,000 in 2009, according to Swiss Re, an insurance provider. The World Health Organization, which hasn't updated its figures past Sept. 30, is just shy of 250,000. By comparison, deaths from terrorism from 1968 to 2009 were less than 115,000, according to reports by the U.S. State Department and the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. The last year in which natural disasters were this deadly was 1983 because of an Ethiopian drought and famine, according to the WHO. Swiss Re calls 2010 the deadliest since 1976. While the Haitian earthquake, Russian heat wave and Pakistani flooding were the biggest killers, deadly quakes also struck Chile, Turkey, China and Indonesia in one of the most active seismic years in decades. Flooding alone this year killed more than 6,300 people in 59 nations through to September, according to the WHO. Inundated countries include China, Italy, India, Colombia and Chad. Super Typhoon Megi with winds of more than 320 kph devastated the Philippines and parts of China.

#### How costly

Disasters caused \$222-billion (U.S.) in economic losses in 2010 - more than Hong Kong's economy - according to Swiss Re. This figure is greater than usual, but not a record. That's because this year's disasters often struck poor areas without heavy insurance, such as Haiti. A three-bedroom, one-storey house that collapsed in northwestern Pakistan during the floods cost \$583 to rebuild, which is what many Pakistanis earn in half a year.

#### How extreme

After strong early-year blizzards paralyzed the mid-Atlantic and record snowfalls hit Russia and China, the temperature turned to broil. The year may go down as the hottest on record worldwide or at the very least in the top three, according to the World Meteorological Organization. The average global temperature through to the end of October was 15C, a shade over the previous record of 2005, according to the National Climatic Data Center. In May, 54C set a record for Pakistan and may have been the hottest temperature recorded in an inhabited location. Northern Australia had the wettest May-October on record, while the southwestern part of that country had its driest spell on record. And

parts of the Amazon River basin struck by drought hit their lowest water levels in recorded history.

### How weird

A volcano in Iceland paralyzed air traffic for days in Europe, disrupting travel for more than seven million people. Other volcanoes in the Congo, Guatemala, Ecuador, the Philippines and Indonesia sent people scurrying for safety. New York City had a rare tornado. A nearly one-kilogram hailstone that was 20 centimetres in diameter fell in South Dakota in July to set a U.S. record. The storm that produced it was one of seven declared disasters for that state this year. There was not much snow to start the Winter Olympics in a relatively balmy Vancouver, while the U.S. East Coast was snowbound. In a 24-hour period in October, Indonesia got the trifecta: a deadly magnitude 7.7 earthquake; a tsunami that killed more than 500 people and a volcano that caused more than 390,000 people to flee. That's after flooding, landslides and more quakes killed hundreds earlier in the year. Even the extremes were extreme. This year started with a good sized El Nino weather oscillation that causes all sorts of extremes worldwide. Then later in the year, the world got the mirror-image weather system with a strong La Nina, which causes a different set of extremes. Having a year with both a strong El Nino and La Nina is unusual.

### How come

The high death toll has less to do with Mother Nature and more to do with mankind. The excessive amount of extreme weather that dominated 2010 is a classic sign of man-made global warming that climate scientists have long warned about. They calculate that the killer Russian heat wave - setting a national record of 44C - would happen once every 100,000 years without global warming. Plus, poor construction and development practices conspire to make nature disasters more deadly than they need be. More people live in poverty in vulnerable buildings in crowded cities. That means that when the ground shakes, the river breaches or the tropical cyclone hits, more people die. "It's a form of suicide, isn't it? We build houses that kill ourselves [in earthquakes]. We build houses in flood zones that drown ourselves," said Roger Bilham, a professor of geological sciences at the University of Colorado. "It's our fault for not anticipating these things. You know, this is the Earth doing its thing."

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