

Missing something?

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ASIA

Natural disasters

Earth, wind and water

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The heavy cost of nature's wrath

IT IS a risky business being Asian—and riskier than it needs to be. Anyone who has read the depressingly frequent news reports of floods in China, earthquakes in India or cyclones in the Pacific knows that an inordinate number of Asians die during natural disasters. More depressing still, a lack of preparedness and a ham-handed response to such events often seems to do more damage than the natural calamity itself. So, at least, a new report from the United Nations Development Programme suggests, by attempting to quantify the risk of dying in different countries during comparable natural disasters*.

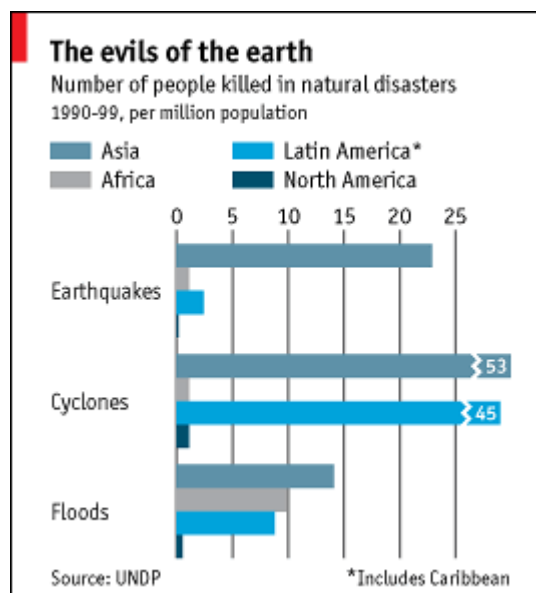
Asia suffers more deaths from floods, cyclones and earthquakes than other continents, even when calculated relative to population (see chart). But the report goes a step further and calculates the proportion of people exposed to natural disasters who

die as a result. It finds that 228 out of every million Afghans exposed to earthquakes die, for example, compared with a figure of nine for Japan. As one might expect, rich countries do a better job protecting their citizens than poor ones. But some countries do better than their living standards would suggest: the proportion of people dying during a cyclone in China is less than a third that in the United States.

The report also found a correlation between various other factors and high mortality rates. Earthquakes cost more lives in countries where cities are growing fast (doubtless thanks to poor housing standards), even in relatively well-off places like Iran and Turkey. Flooding is most deadly not in crowded countries like Bangladesh, but in areas with dispersed populations, such as Papua New Guinea—presumably because it is harder to bring help to the victims when disaster strikes.

The report does have its flaws. A country that suffered a particularly catastrophic event between 1980 and 2000, the period studied, will consequently suffer in the rankings. And by relying on deaths as a measure of risk, the report ignores the devastating economic damage wrought by natural disasters. Asian countries that experience regular floods, such as Cambodia and Vietnam, actually score quite well despite enormous economic costs, because relatively few people die. Nonetheless, argues Thomas Brennan, one of the authors, the report makes clear that good planning and efficient administration matter just as much as money when it comes to staving off disaster.

The report is particularly relevant, Mr Brennan argues, since



Asia is likely to suffer more from natural disasters in the future. Global warming seems to be prompting more extreme and volatile weather, including fiercer and more frequent cyclones. Flooding, too, will probably become more severe and less predictable, as warmer weather helps to melt ice in Tibet, changing the timing and volume of surges in major rivers such as the Yellow, Yangtze, Mekong, Irrawaddy, Ganges and Indus.

The report also blames ill-conceived tourist development for the destruction of reefs and mangrove forests that once protected coastal areas from cyclones and flooding. But if tourists only knew the risks they were running, they might never show up in the first place.



Not what was planned

*["Reducing Disaster Risk: A Challenge for Development"](#), UNDP. 2004.

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