



[How the Conflict Contributes to the Flood Crisis in Libya](#)

By Loretta Wolchko

Last week, Africa saw one of its worst natural disasters in history. Storm Daniel, now dubbed the deadliest weather event of 2023 so far, hit Libya on September 10. The port city of Derna fell victim to the worst of the destruction after two dams broke and released tsunami-like rushes of water into the city. It is estimated that more than 10,000 Libyans in Derna are missing and roughly 4,000 are confirmed dead. Since the storm has subsided, many Libyans have taken to the streets to protest the authorities. It is widely speculated that if the government had taken action and improved the city infrastructure, primarily the dams, the damage would not have been nearly as catastrophic. It raises the question of if this was simply another tragic natural disaster, or if some accountability should be taken for the magnitude of the damage.

A state of emergency was declared on September 9. The following day, all hell broke loose as thirty million cubic meters of water were released into the city. Derna and its inhabitants were defenseless as the equivalent of 12,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools of water flooded the city that was once their home. Entire neighborhoods have been washed away, with locals who survived telling news outlets that they are seeing bodies wash up on the streets because hospitals are too overwhelmed. International aid, both medical and military, has reached the area for rescue efforts and to set up makeshift hospitals.

According to city officials, the collapse of the first dam can be attributed to its height of only 70 meters. It was not nearly large enough to withstand the water coming in from the storm. Once the first dam collapsed, it was only a matter of time before the combination of the rain as well as the water that had collected broke the second dam. There was also a significant difference in elevation between the two dams, strengthening the force in which the water rushed down and resulting in the destruction the city is now experiencing. If the dams were maintained, it is unlikely that there would not have been any flooding at all, but the destruction and suffering experienced by Libyans would not have been as severe.

To explore the inaction of the Libyan government and how it contributed to the devastation in Derna requires an understanding of the current sociopolitical climate of Libya. The nation is presently undergoing a humanitarian crisis, which began in 2011 with the first civil war against the backdrop of the “Arab Spring” movement. Over the last decade, Libya has since seen another civil war and sustained use of violence from post-revolutionary groups. In addition, the country is torn amidst a power struggle between two acting prime ministers and their governments - the Government of National Unity (which is internationally recognized as legitimate) and the Government of National Stability (GNS). Derna is under the control of military commander Khalifa Haftar and overseen by the “eastern” government, the GNS. Haftar served in the Libyan military under dictator Muammar Gaddafi and later took part in his removal from the presidency. He has acted as a warlord ever since, controlling large areas of Libya.

Politicians in Libya, including the mayor of Derna, Abdulmenam al-Ghaithi have deemed the tragedy as simply that: a natural disaster of epic proportions that in no way could have been prevented. It is noted by various sources that Ghaithi has since reportedly been suspended from his position along with the members of his council, making him

now the former mayor of the city. Following the tragedy, Ghaithi has announced that the death toll likely could have been even higher and that the floods perhaps could have caused 20,000 missing persons rather than the current estimate of 10,000. However, experts have cited that the corruption the nation has been experiencing contributed to the immense scale of the disaster.

The most blatant example of negligence from the government was that the dams that collapsed had not been maintained since 2002, during the rule of Gaddafi. Researchers and academics informed authorities throughout the years that the dams were not sound enough to withstand a potential flood, but no action has been taken to improve the infrastructure of the city in the event of an emergency (or in general to improve the living conditions of the city's inhabitants). Additionally, because of the power struggle between the two provisional governments, funds are not properly allocated nor are budgets discussed or even put together. The divided state has been facing a variety of systemic issues for well over a decade, even before the revolution in 2011. Currently, one of Haftar's sons is leading the disaster relief management. With the corruption so deeply ingrained into the governing of the failed state, it is not surprising to see the immense nonintervention and victim-blaming from those in charge.

Local authorities in Derna are taking the brunt of the blame for the inaction and negligence that resulted in the calamitous loss. Protesters have taken to what is left of the streets of the city to express their frustration over the tragedy. On Monday, crowds gathered at Ghaithi's residence and set fire to his home. Others targeted parliament and held demonstrations at the Sabaha Mosque, a landmark in Derna.

Some Libyans hope that the disaster is what can bring the opposing governments together, unifying the people of their country, but authorities continue to brush off any accountability for the tragedy. They are urging their people to not place blame on any party and instead focus on recovery efforts. No real action is being taken to handle the systemic issues in Libya's foundation. It seems that the hopes for a unified government will remain unlikely.