

Natural disasters 'killed over 220,000' in 2008

Natural disasters killed over 220,000 people in 2008, making it one of the most devastating years on record and underlining the need for a global climate deal, the world's number two reinsurer said Monday.

Although the number of natural disasters was lower than in 2007, the catastrophes that occurred proved to be more destructive in terms of the number of victims and the financial cost of the damage caused, Germany-based Munich Re said in its annual assessment.

"This continues the long-term trend we have been observing. Climate change has already started and is very probably contributing to increasingly frequent weather extremes and ensuing natural catastrophes," Munich Re board member Torsten Jeworrek said.

Most devastating in terms of human fatalities was Cyclone Nargis, which lashed Myanmar on May 2-3 to kill more than 135,000 people and leave more than one million homeless.

Just days later an earthquake shook China's Sichuan province, leaving 70,000 dead, 18,000 missing and almost five million homeless, according to official figures, Munich Re said.

Around 1,000 people died in a severe cold snap in January in Afghanistan, Kyrgystan and Tajikistan, while 635 perished in August and September in floods in India, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Typhoon Fengshen killed 557 people in China and the Philippines in June, while earthquakes in Pakistan in October left 300 dead.

Six tropical cyclones also slammed into the southern United States, including Ike which, with insured losses of 10 billion dollars, was the industry's costliest catastrophe of the year.

In Europe, an intense low-pressure system called Emma caused two billion dollars worth of damage in March, while a storm dubbed Hilal in late May and early June left 1.1 billion dollars' worth.

The earthquake in Sichuan province was the most expensive overall single catastrophe of 2008, causing around 85 billion dollars worth of damage, helping to make the year the third most expensive on record, Munich Re said.

With 200 billion dollars' worth of damage, only 2005, when a large number of hurricanes slammed into the southern United States, and 1995, year of the Kobe earthquake in Japan, wreaked more destruction since records began in 1900.

According to provisional estimates from the World Meteorological Organization, 2008 was the tenth warmest year since the beginning of routine temperature recording and the eighth warmest in the northern hemisphere.

This means that the ten warmest years ever recorded have all occurred in the last 12 years, Munich Re said.

"It is now very probable that the progressive warming of the atmosphere is due to the greenhouse gases emitted by human activity. The weather machine is running in top gear, bringing more intense severe weather events," it said.

The number of tropical cyclones in the North Atlantic in 2008 was much higher than the long-term average, and in terms of both the total number of storms and the number of major hurricanes, 2008 was the fourth most severe hurricane season since reliable data have been available, it said.

The world needed "effective and binding rules on CO2 emissions, so that climate change is curbed and future generations do not have to live with weather scenarios that are difficult to control," board member Jeworrek said.

Last December, the international community agreed in Bali on a two-year roadmap culminating in a new global climate deal to be signed in Copenhagen in December 2009.

Unprecedented in scale and complexity, this accord, due to take effect from 2012, is meant to rein in the greenhouse gases that stoke global warming and throw a lifeline to poor countries exposed to mutated weather patterns.

