

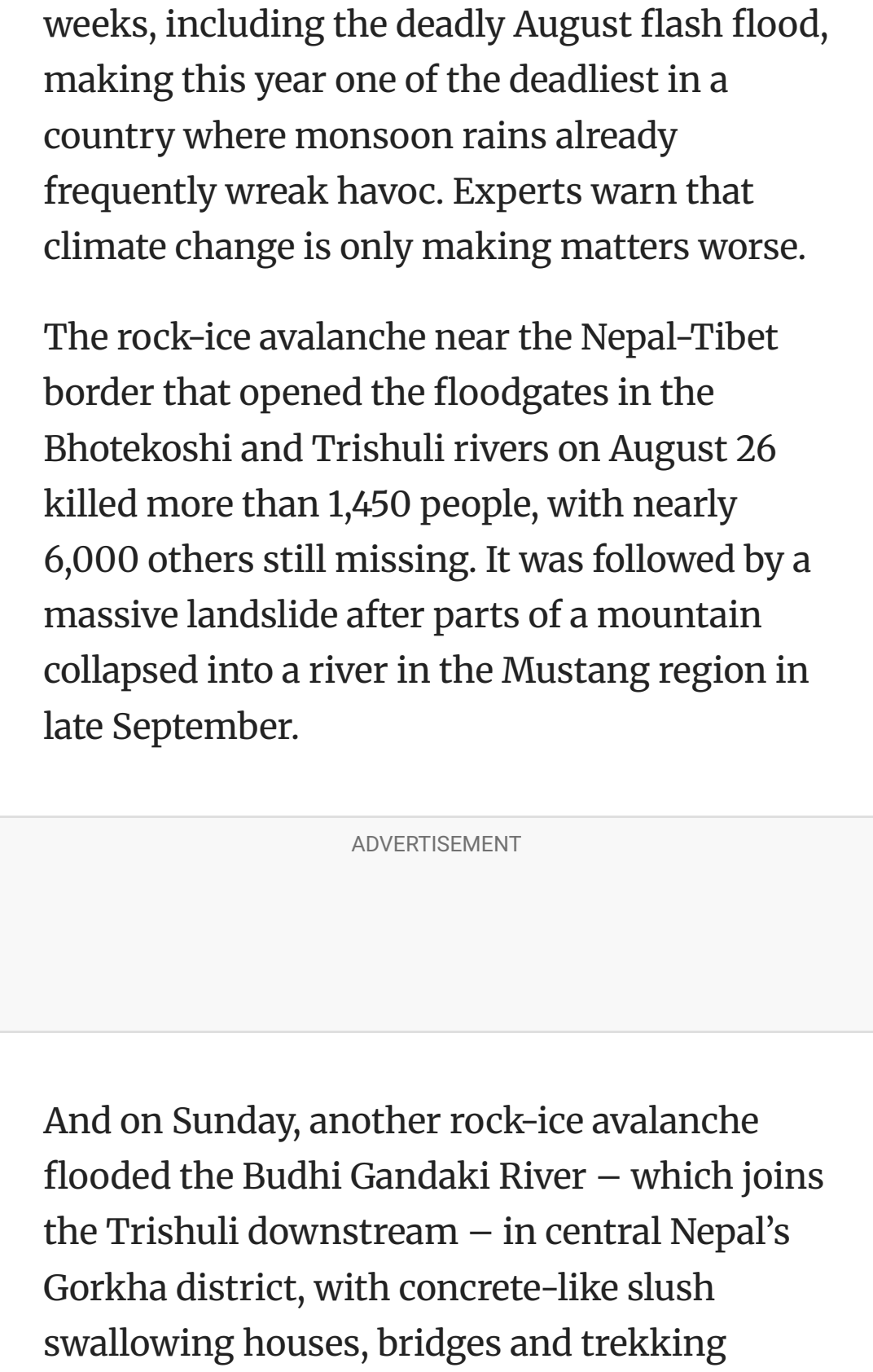
Inside Nepal's unending cycle of avalanches, floods and landslides

Experts warn such events could become an ‘annual occurrence’ and urge the government to rethink its development model

4-MIN

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Bibek Bhandari

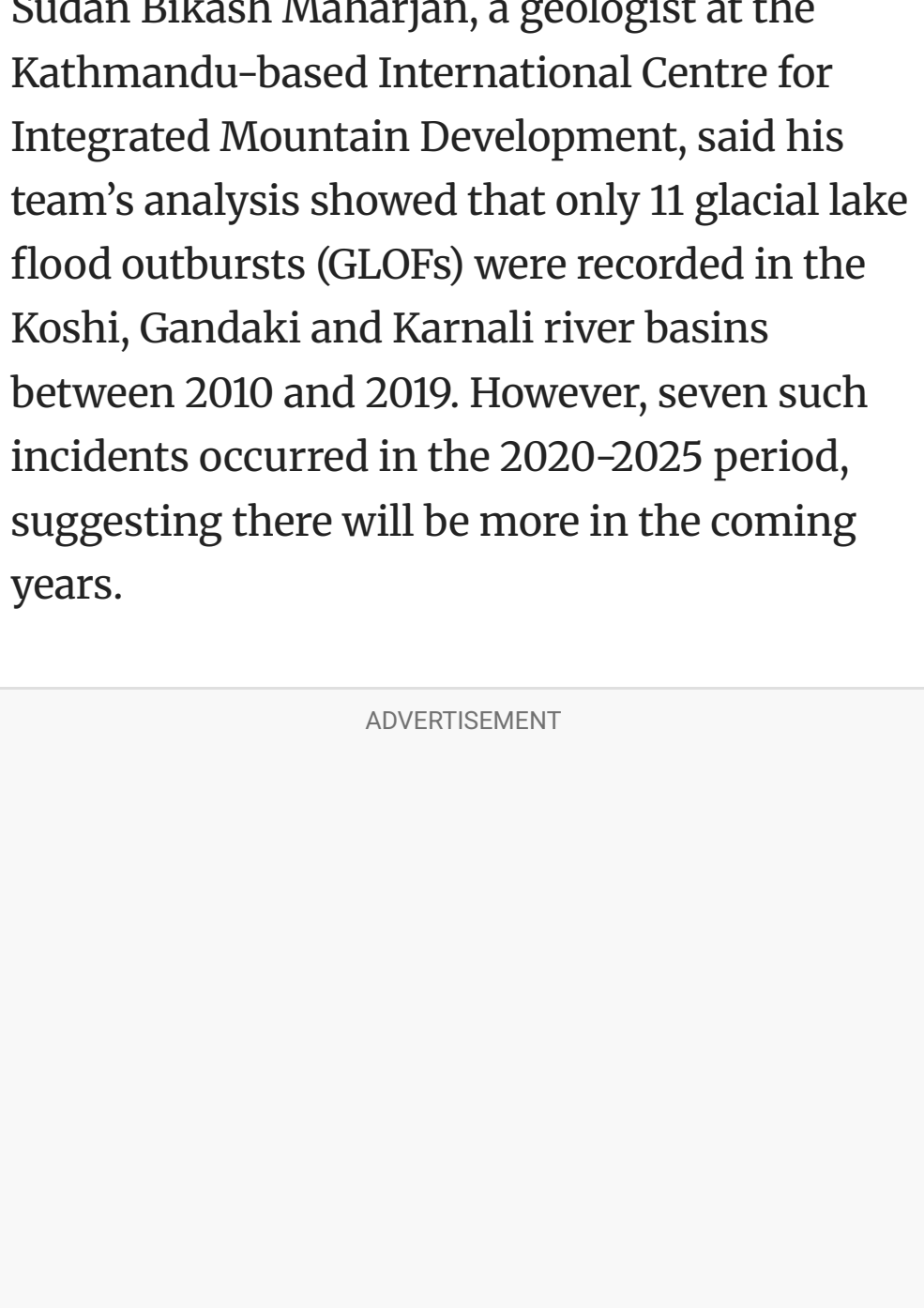
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[Nepal](#) has weathered three disasters in six weeks, including the deadly August flash flood, making this year one of the deadliest in a country where monsoon rains already frequently wreak havoc. Experts warn that climate change is only making matters worse.

The rock-ice avalanche near the Nepal-Tibet border that opened the floodgates in the Bhotekoshi and Trishuli rivers on August 26 killed more than 1,450 people, with nearly 6,000 others still missing. It was followed by a massive landslide after parts of a mountain collapsed into a river in the Mustang region in late September.

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And on Sunday, another rock-ice avalanche flooded the Budhi Gandaki River – which joins the Trishuli downstream – in central Nepal’s Gorkha district, with concrete-like slush swallowing houses, bridges and trekking trails, though no casualties were reported.



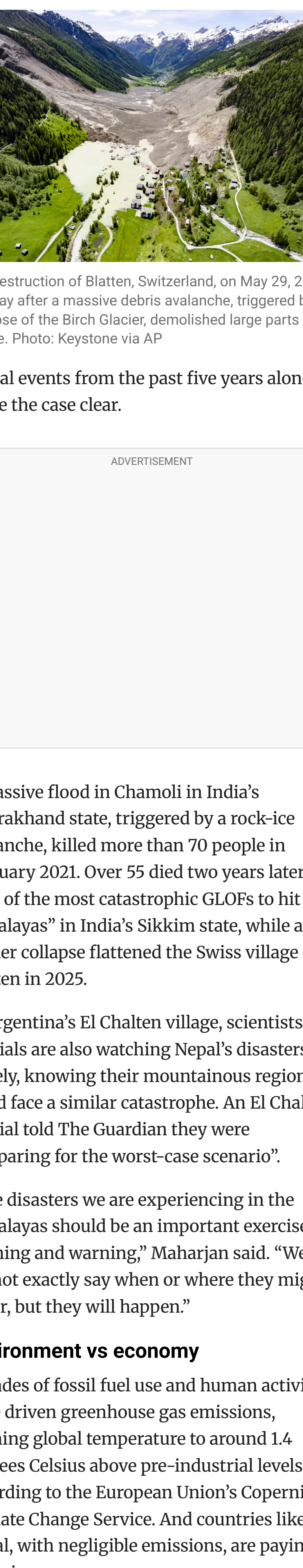
Damaged houses lie partially submerged in sludge along the banks of the Budhi Gandaki river in Nepal's Gorkha district on Wednesday. Photo: AFP

“To have two similar events, nearby and in one year, is unprecedented in Nepal,” said John Pomeroy, director of the Centre for Hydrology at Canada’s University of Saskatchewan, who has been following the events.

“While climate change did not directly trigger these catastrophes, the thawing of frozen ground, melt of glaciers, increased lubrication of frozen materials from rapid snowmelt and rainfall all destabilised the high mountains and created the preconditions that permitted these events to form.”

Nepal’s cycle of disasters – evoking scenes from Hollywood doomsday films – made global headlines this year, but the same places have experienced recurring floods and landslides over the years.

Before the August floods, the border area in Rasuwa was washed away in July 2025 after a supraglacial lake burst, killing at least nine people. Chame in the north-central district of Manang experienced similar floods and landslides last month and in 2021, and such events have become cyclical in Mustang and Humla districts, both near the Tibetan border.



At least 5 missing after new flash flooding sweeps through northern Nepal

Sudan Bikash Maharjan, a geologist at the Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, said his team’s analysis showed that only 11 glacial lake flood outbursts (GLOFs) were recorded in the Koshi, Gandaki and Karnali river basins between 2010 and 2019. However, seven such incidents occurred in the 2020-2025 period, suggesting there will be more in the coming years.

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“The patterns are different, but the cascading effects are making these disasters bigger,” he said. “Such events are increasing compared to before, and this could be an annual occurrence.”

Global warning

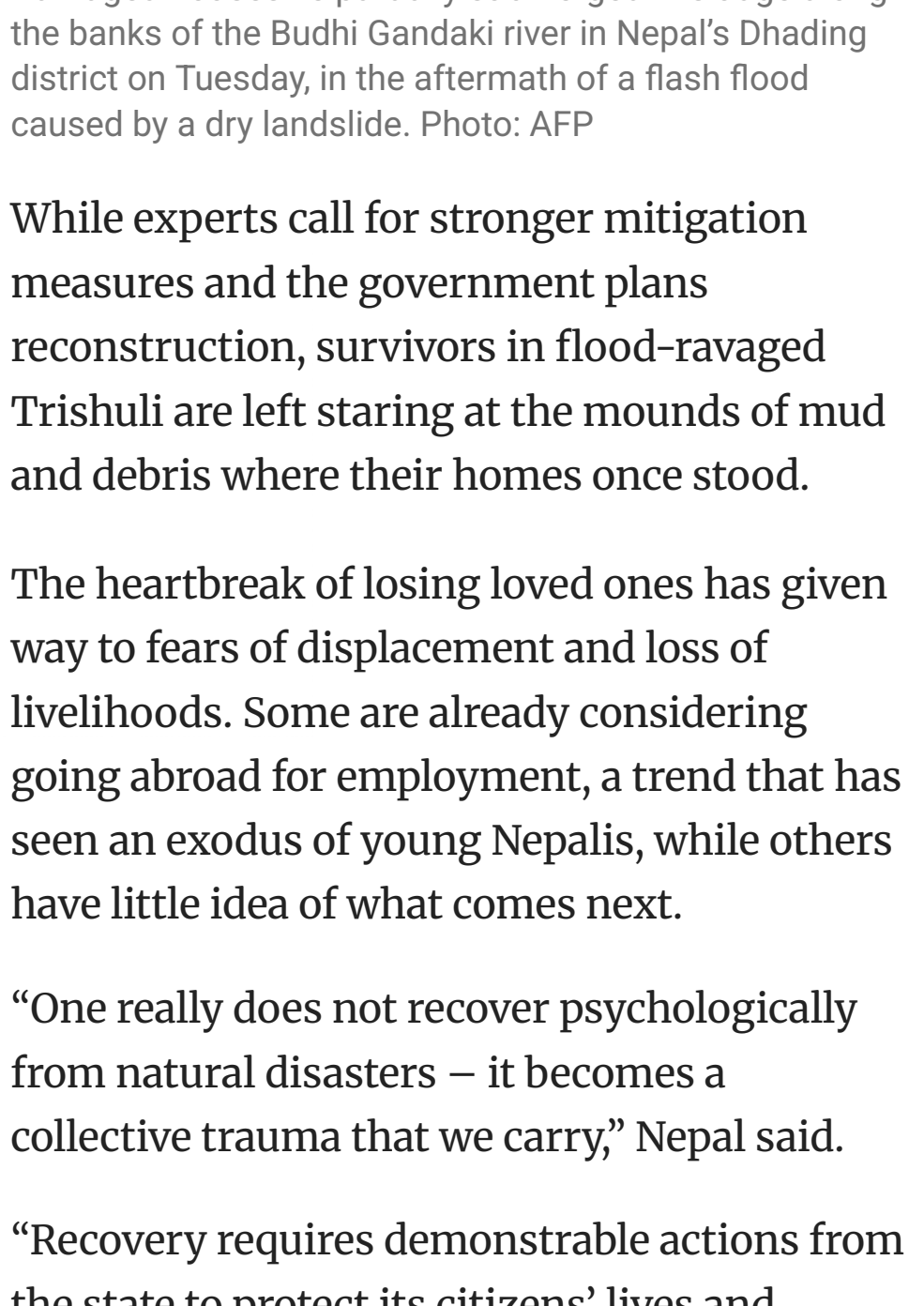
What is happening in Nepal is a warning to the world, as mountain rainfall occurs more frequently and intensely, according to climate scientists.

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Pomeroy said disasters due to thawing frozen ground, rapid snowmelt and glacier melt were increasing in mountain regions worldwide.

He added that countries such as the United States, Switzerland and Canada were seeing related problems, prompting them to develop advanced early warning and hydrological forecasting systems, while GLOFs were occurring more frequently in Nepal, India, China, Central Asia and the Andean nations.

“It’s a problem that is spreading globally,” he said. “High mountain regions are often impoverished, poorly serviced by infrastructure, populated by indigenous peoples, bisected by international boundaries, sparsely gauged and monitored, and far away from decision-making centres. This makes them particularly vulnerable to disasters such as those that have befallen Nepal in recent months.”



The destruction of Blatten, Switzerland, on May 29, 2025, one day after a massive debris avalanche, triggered by the collapse of the Birch Glacier, demolished large parts of the village. Photo: Keystone via AP

Global events from the past five years alone make the case clear.

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A massive flood in Chamoli in India’s Uttarakhand state, triggered by a rock-ice avalanche, killed more than 70 people in February 2021. Over 55 died two years later in “one of the most catastrophic GLOFs to hit the Himalayas” in India’s Sikkim state, while a glacier collapse flattened the Swiss village of Blatten in 2025.

In Argentina’s El Chalten village, scientists and officials are also watching Nepal’s disasters closely, knowing their mountainous region could face a similar catastrophe. An El Chalten official told The Guardian they were “preparing for the worst-case scenario”.

“The disasters we are experiencing in the Himalayas should be an important exercise in learning and warning,” Maharjan said. “We cannot exactly say when or where they might occur, but they will happen.”

Environment vs economy

Decades of fossil fuel use and human activities have driven greenhouse gas emissions, pushing global temperature to around 1.4 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, according to the European Union’s Copernicus Climate Change Service. And countries like Nepal, with negligible emissions, are paying the price.

Losses from the August disaster exceed 408.28 billion rupees (US\$2.66 billion). While the new government formed after last year’s youth uprising promised 7 per cent economic growth in the next five years, the World Bank projects growth will slow to 3.7 per cent next year.

Damaged buildings and houses covered in mud next to the Likhu River following deadly flash floods and mudslides in Devighat, Nuwakot district, Nepal, on August 30. Photo: Reuters

Arpita Nepal, an economist and director of research and development at Kathmandu’s Samriddhi Foundation think tank, said disasters affected Nepal’s major growth sectors, including energy, tourism and agriculture, and could dent people’s confidence in reinvesting in disaster-prone areas in the long run, creating endemic poverty cycles in those places.

“Nepal’s public debt is 45.1 per cent of its GDP, and the current fiscal deficit level is 1.7 per cent of GDP – this implies that we do have fiscal space at the moment to invest in recovery and reconstruction,” she said.

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“As the number of disasters climbs, our fiscal space to react will contract. However, post-2015 earthquake recovery shows that recovery from a natural disaster is possible and growth can pick up.”

But for that, analysts say Nepal should prioritise an ecologically friendly growth model and uphold environmental impact assessments for infrastructure projects, which critics say are largely ignored. The recent disasters have also put a spotlight on the country’s hydropower building spree – a dozen were destroyed in the August flood – largely built on mountainsides to harness electricity from rapid river currents.

Flood-affected residents sit outside temporary shelter tents uphill in Betrawati in Nepal's Nuwakot district on October 1, in the aftermath of the August 26 flash flood. Photo: AFP

Sanjaya Devkota, a geoscientist and civil engineer currently heading the Forum for Energy and Environment Development at the Institute of Himalayan Risk Reduction, said Nepal should rethink its development model.

He said planning should protect floodplains and natural drainages, establish setbacks based on local hazard assessments, and consider how roads, bridges, embankments, settlements and hydropower projects interacted.

“The policy contradiction is that we depend on rivers for energy, agriculture and livelihoods while sometimes allowing development that constricts their space or increases exposure along their banks,” Devkota said.

“We should be honest about whether Nepal has fully applied its own lessons. Producing a report after a disaster is useful, but learning becomes meaningful when it changes a road alignment, a construction approval, a warning procedure or a budget before the next event.”

Damaged houses lie partially submerged in sludge along the banks of the Budhi Gandaki river in Nepal's Dhading district on Tuesday, in the aftermath of a flash flood caused by a dry landslide. Photo: AFP

While experts call for stronger mitigation measures and the government plans reconstruction, survivors in flood-ravaged Trishuli are left staring at the mounds of mud and debris where their homes once stood.

The heartbreak of losing loved ones has given way to fears of displacement and loss of livelihoods. Some are already considering going abroad for employment, a trend that has seen an exodus of young Nepalis, while others have little idea of what comes next.

“One really does not recover psychologically from natural disasters – it becomes a collective trauma that we carry,” Nepal said.

“Recovery requires demonstrable actions from the state to protect its citizens’ lives and property. [But] if we do not recover economically, then we will be brewing another revolution where citizens will keep looking for political actors who can deliver on their promises. This will make us more politically unstable in the long run.”

Bibek Bhandari

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