

UK, Ireland Swamped By Extremely Heavy Rainfall

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Floods cause havoc in parts of U.K., Ireland

200 rescued in one hard-hit town in northern England, two bridges collapse

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COCKERMOUTH,
England - Military helicopters winched dozens of people to safety and emergency workers in inflatable boats rescued scores more as floods on Friday swamped northern England's picturesque Lake District. One police officer was missing and feared dead after a bridge was swept away.

British
soldiers conducted house-to-house searches for those trapped by floods as deep as 8 feet. Troops also dropped down on lines from air force helicopters, breaking through rooftops to pluck people to safety.

Emergency
services said more than 200 people were rescued in the hardest-hit town, Cockermouth. At least 960 homes were flooded after a day of unprecedented rain, police in the northern region of Cumbria said.

Heavy
rain and gales also brought widespread flooding to Ireland, as more than 3 feet of water shut down the center of the country's second-largest city, Cork, and more than a dozen towns and villages.

Cockermouth, a market town 330 miles northwest of London, lies at the junction of the Cocker and Derwent rivers and is known for being the birthplace of poet William Wordsworth.

"It has devastated the town," said Michael Dunn, manager of the Bitter End pub in Cockermouth. "There is a lot of properties in Main Street, private shops, that have had their windows smashed in by the force of the water and by debris in the water.

"There were cars floating down the street. It will be a long time before Cockermouth recovers from this."

Easing waters

The rain stopped and floodwaters began to ease Friday, giving rescuers a chance to reach trapped people by boat. Debris swirled around the boats as they pulled people to safety.

Tony Walker of Cockermouth told BBC radio he was on the top floor of his house and the water on the ground floor was chest-high.

"I've had better mornings," Walker said. "I've been here all night and I've run out of water now, so I'm thinking of making a break for it, really. The water is still pretty deep, it's going down, but at this rate it's going to be hours before it's clear."

Forecasters said the rainfall was unprecedented. The Environment Agency recorded 12.3 inches of rain in 24 hours in one spot — one of the wettest days ever recorded in England.

"It looks like a very historical event," said Julian Mayes, a forecaster with MeteoGroup UK.

Environment Secretary Hilary Benn told the BBC that flood defenses were meant to withstand a one-in-100-years flood — but could not cope with the volume of water.

"What we dealt with last night was probably more like one-in-a-1,000, so even the very best defenses, if you have such quantities of rain in such a short space of time, can be over-topped," Benn said.

Many roads impassible

Police

urged people not to travel, as many roads were impassible. Two bridges collapsed in the town of Workington, including a main one over the River Derwent.

Cumbria

Police said Constable Bill Barker, 45, was swept into the water as he stood on the bridge. The force said Friday that rescuers searching for him had found a body.

"This is a stone bridge — to wash away a bridge of that size and dimension is incredible," said lawmaker Tony Cunningham.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown that he had spoken to Cumbria Chief Constable Craig Mackey to offer help.

"Our thoughts are with all those who have been impacted by these floods," Brown said.

The

Irish army deployed more than 100 soldiers, two dozen trucks and several flat-bottomed boats to evacuate people trapped by waist-deep floodwaters in cars and homes. A helicopter also winched to safety a County Galway family of five, including the 87-year-old grandmother.

The floods caused transport chaos along Ireland's western coast, with many major roads blocked and train services canceled.

The River Suck burst its banks in County Leitrim near the Northern Ireland border, flooding the town of Ballinasloe and cutting off major roads to Ireland's northwest. About 40 families had to be evacuated by boat.

The Irish weather forecasting service, Met Eireann, said parts of southern and western Ireland suffered their most intense and sustained rainfall in 30 years.

Friday was mostly sunny but more rain and gales were forecast for the weekend.

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