

Natural disasters 'killed 295,000 in 2010'

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FRANKFURT — The Haiti earthquake and floods in Pakistan and China helped make 2010 an exceptional year for natural disasters, killing 295,000 and costing \$130 billion, the world's top reinsurer said Monday.

"The high number of weather-related natural catastrophes and record temperatures both globally and in different regions of the world provide further indications of advancing climate change," said Munich Re in a report.

The last time so many people died in natural disasters was in 1983, when 300,000 people died, mainly due to famine in Ethiopia, spokesman Gerd Henghuber told AFP.

A total of 950 natural disasters were recorded last year, making 2010 the second worst year since 1980. The average number of events over the past 10 years was 785.

And in terms of economic cost, insured losses amounted to approximately \$37 billion, putting 2010 among the six most loss-intensive years for the insurance industry since 1980.

"2010 showed the major risks we have to cope with. There were a number of severe earthquakes. The hurricane season was also eventful," said Torsten Jeworrek, the firm's chief executive.

The earthquake in Haiti in January was by far the worst disaster in terms of human cost, killing 222,570 people, Munich Re said. Some 56,000 died in a combination of heatwaves and forest fires in Russia, it said.

The other most destructive events were an earthquake in China in April that killed 2,700, floods in Pakistan between July and September that cost 1,760 lives and August floods in China in which 1,470 perished.

Although the Haiti earthquake resulted in human devastation on a "staggering scale", it cost the industry very little as very few people in the poverty-stricken country can afford insurance.

However, an earthquake in Chile that hit over a month later was the world's most expensive natural disaster last year, with overall losses of 30 billion dollars and insured losses of eight billion dollars.

The second most expensive disaster for the insurance industry was a series of earthquakes that rattled New Zealand, which cost an estimated 3.3 billion dollars but caused no deaths.

The global distribution of natural catastrophes in 2010 was however "comparable to that of previous years," Munich Re said.

The American continent suffered the most disasters -- 365 in total -- with 310 in Asia. A total of 120 natural disasters were recorded in Europe, 90 in Africa and 65 in Australia and Oceania.

In 2009, considered a "benign" year due to the absence of major catastrophes and a less severe than usual hurricane season in the North Atlantic, there were 900 "destructive natural hazard events", costing some 60 billion dollars.

Around 11,000 people lost their lives in natural disasters in 2009, well below the average of 77,000.

Last month, another major reinsurer, Swiss Re, reported that man-made and natural disasters generated worldwide economic losses of 222 billion dollars in 2010, more than three times the figure for the previous year.