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What's causing the extreme weather and flooding in Europe?

Heavy rains that have caused catastrophic damage have been held in place by other weather fronts

By Phoebe Southworth, Daniel Wighton *and* Alex Clark

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A low-pressure vortex circling over Europe and hemmed in by other weather fronts has triggered the [catastrophic flooding in Germany and neighbouring countries](#).

Meteorologists believe the intense weather system may have also caused the [flash floods in London](#) as well as heavy rainfall in surrounding areas.

Looming above Germany is a highly charged band of air which has caused record rainfall in western parts of the country.

Weather experts said that rain in the region over the course of 48 hours had been unprecedented, as a near-stationary low-pressure weather system – know as "Bernd" – also caused sustained local downpours to the west in France, Belgium and the Netherlands.



Residents wade towards safety after heavy rainfall in Liege, Belgium, on Thursday | CREDIT: BRUNO FAHY / Avalon

The low pressure appeared to have been held in place by adjacent weather systems, causing continuous and highly concentrated downpours.

The Deutscher Wetterdienst, Germany's equivalent to the Met Office, said that the storms had been so bad because "Bernd" was "surrounded by high-pressure systems and was therefore unable to move on".

Key areas hit by flooding



The UK Met Office said the downpours that caused flooding in London were likely linked to the weather events in Europe.

Grahame Madge, from Met Office, said: "What tends to happen with these quite big country-scale features is that other weather patterns around them will be influenced. It's affected the flow over the UK and contributed to some of these intense showers."

Flash floods cause chaos across London, disrupting Tube travel



Mr Madge said showers moving across southern areas of the UK began to converge, so mild spells of rain combined to make more intense downpours.

Pedestrians were left wading through streets in parts of London where cars were abandoned to high waters this week. Almost 100mm of rain fell within a couple of hours.

"When there's heat and moisture in the system, that can lead to very heavy downpours. They're sporadic in nature and where they do occur, they can be very intense," Mr Madge said.

What next?

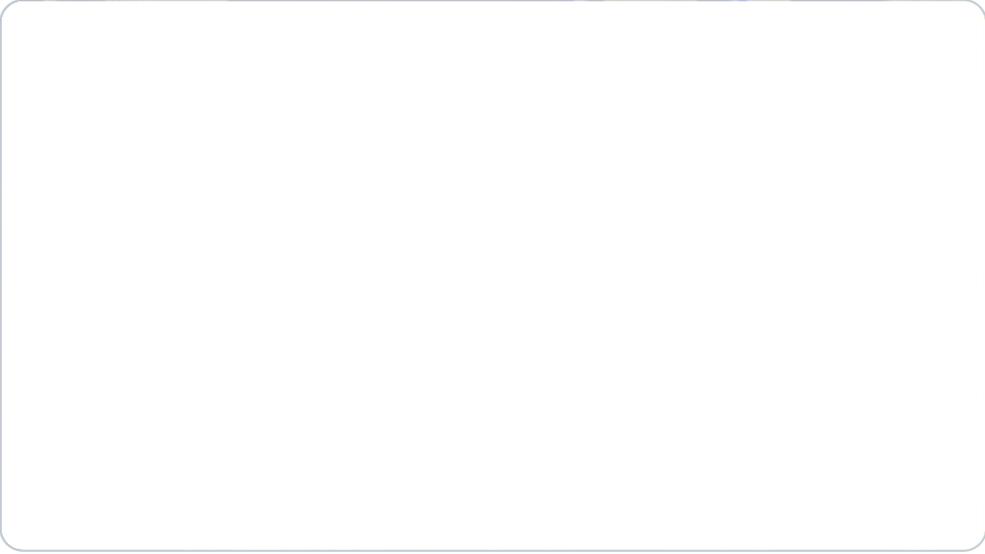
Forecasters say Germany should be braced for more extreme showers over the coming days which will likely lead to rivers overflowing and damage to nearby properties.

Meteorologists predicted further "extreme storms" in the western and central parts of Germany, with peak rainfall possibly reaching 200mm per square metre. Better weather is forecast in western Germany for next week.



BBC Weather 
@bbcweather 

Here's the rainfall radar from the last 24 hours, showing the weather system that has brought flooding to parts of Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands.



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The German Federal Weather Service (DWD) said that "Bernd" still had Germany in its grip.

Are extreme weather events becoming more frequent?

Extreme weather events are hitting Europe more frequently as climate change warms the continent, experts agree.

2020 was Europe's hottest year since records began over 300 years ago, according to analysis of global weather stations by Berkeley Earth, and eight of the 10 hottest ever years have been in the past decade.

The continent's average temperature is now roughly 2C warmer than it was at the start of the 20th century - an increase that has come with a growth in extreme weather.

For example, warmer air holds more water which, in turn, can lead to extreme downpours.

Extreme weather around the world, pictured:

This has coincided with a large increase in severe flooding events, which grew more than threefold between the Eighties and the 2000s.

Flooding can also come from rising sea levels, particularly impacting low-lying areas of Europe, such as the Netherlands and Belgium.



A rescue boat is carried by a special purpose vehicle in the flooded Ehrang neighbourhood in Trier, western Germany | CREDIT: AFP



People stand in a flooded street following heavy rains in Liege | CREDIT: BRUNO FAHY/AFP

Globally, sea levels have increased by around 20cm since 1900 but this could jump to up to 80cm in Europe by the end of the century as global ice caps melt, according to the European Environment Agency (EEA).

Meanwhile, data shows southern Europe has become drier and hotter, with droughts increasing since the 1950s, and rivers running lower during the summer months.

Increased heat has also been attributed to forest fires in parts of the continent where they were previously rare.

In 2018, more countries suffered forest fires than ever recorded before, including Sweden, which suffered the worst fires in the country's modern history.

Is it linked to climate change?

The German interior minister on Thursday blamed global warming for the floods.

Speaking with German tabloid Bild, Horst Seehofer said preparation for such events needed to be better as they were likely to be more frequent in future.

"These extreme weather conditions are the consequences of climate change," Mr Seehofer said. "We have to prepare much better for this, including when it comes to flood protection."

Because a warmer atmosphere holds more water, climate change increases the risk and intensity of flooding from extreme rainfall.

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