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India faces 3,782 major landslides in past seven years, disaster linked to loss of forest cover

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NEW DELHI: Heavy rainfall events are showing an increasing trend over Kerala during the southwest (summer) monsoon season as per the past 20 years (2001-21) data and the state recorded the highest number of major landslides in the country in the past seven years, the ministry of earth sciences informed Parliament this week.

Analysis of heavy rainfall and landslides data of the southern state not only shows its growing vulnerability to extreme weather events but also calls for saving the ecological fragile Western Ghats where indiscriminate human activities may make the situation worse in coming years.

Out of a total 3,782 landslides between 2015 and 2022 in India, the highest 2,239 were reported in Kerala followed by West Bengal (376), Tamil Nadu (196), Karnataka (194) and Jammu & Kashmir (184).

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The ministry also informed that the Geological Survey of India (GSI) has carried out the National Landslide Susceptibility Mapping (NLSM) of the total area of 4.3 lakh sq. km (around 13% of India's total geographical area) in different landslide prone states/UTs where the largest 71,228 sq. km of vulnerable areas fall in Arunachal Pradesh followed by 42,108 sq. km in Himachal

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Pradesh, 40,065 sq. km in Ladakh (UT), 39,009 sq. km in Uttarakhand and 31,323 sq km in Karnataka. Other north-eastern states in the list of top 10 vulnerable states include Assam (24,144 sq. km), Manipur (23,250 sq. km) and Meghalaya (22,601 sq. km).

Data on NLSM, shared by the ministry in written response to a Parliament question in Lok Sabha on Wednesday, also indicates high vulnerability of north-eastern states to landslides. Though the ministry has not directly attributed it to the forest cover loss, the comparative analysis of the data from the latest India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2021 clearly shows correlation between green cover loss and landslide vulnerability of the hilly states.

Arunachal Pradesh reported the largest forest cover loss (257 sq km) in 2021 compared to 2019 followed by Manipur (249 sq km), Nagaland (235 sq km), Mizoram (186 km) and Meghalaya (73 sq km). Incidentally, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Meghalaya figured in the list of top 10 states/UTs in terms of landslide vulnerable areas as per the NLSM.

Referring to post disaster investigations of the landslides, the ministry attributed the major landslides to "unprecedented high rainfall". It, however, also said, "The other important geo-factors such as terrain character, slope forming material, geomorphology, land use/land-cover in different terrain etc. are the preparatory factors for initiation of landslides. Anthropogenic causes such as unprotected slope cuts, blocking of drainages etc. have also been reported in many of the slides."