El Niño may bring a wetter, warmer winter to the Hindu Kush Himalaya

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News

The HKH Winter Outlook 2026 by the Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), with Beijing Normal University and the Institute of Atmospheric Physics, Chinese Academy of Sciences (reported 23 Nov 2026), says a strong El Niño (NOAA puts the chance of it becoming the strongest since records began in 1950 at about 60%) may bring above-normal precipitation to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, northern Myanmar and Nepal. A warmer winter may bring more rain than snow, raising risks of floods, landslides and avalanches, especially in the western Himalaya; dry pockets may see wildfires, and a smaller eastern snowpack could cut spring water.

Key facts for the exam

Point	Details
Main driver	Strong ("super") El Niño; about 60% chance of the strongest since 1950 (NOAA)
Expected	Wetter and warmer winter; more rain, less snow in places
Hazards	Floods, landslides, rain-on-snow avalanches, wildfires
India	South India drier than normal, central India near normal; above-normal snow depth in Himachal Pradesh and the far north

Point	Details
Conference	HKH cryosphere conference, Kathmandu, 25–27 Nov 2026

Background

- El Niño is the periodic warming of the central and eastern equatorial Pacific; a "super" El Niño is one where sea temperatures rise about 2°C or more above normal. It usually weakens India's south-west monsoon.
- The Hindu Kush Himalaya is called the "Third Pole" because it holds the largest ice outside the polar regions; it feeds major rivers like the Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra. ICIMOD (1983) has eight member countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan.
- North India's winter rain and snow come mainly from western disturbances.

Tamil Nadu link: Tamil Nadu gets about half of its annual rain from the north-east monsoon (October–December), which often tends to be normal or above normal in El Niño years; heavy rain in 1997 and the 2015 Chennai floods came in strong El Niño years.

Frequently asked questions

What is this news about?

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What are the key facts to remember for the exam?

Main driver: Strong ("super") El Niño; about 60% chance of the strongest since 1950 (NOAA); Expected: Wetter and warmer winter; more rain, less snow in places; Hazards: Floods, landslides, rain-on-snow avalanches, wildfires; India: South India drier than normal, central India near normal; above-normal snow depth in Himachal Pradesh and the far north.

What is the background to this news?

El Niño is the periodic warming of the central and eastern equatorial Pacific; a "super" El Niño is one where sea temperatures rise about 2°C or more above normal.

Practice questions (with answers)

1. ICIMOD, which released the 'HKH Winter Outlook 2026', is based in:

A) Thimphu, Bhutan

B) Kathmandu, Nepal

C) Lhasa, China

D) Dehradun, India

Answer: B – Explanation: The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development was set up in 1983; it prepared the outlook with Beijing Normal University and the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

2. How many member countries does ICIMOD have?

A) 10

B) 6

C) 8

D) 7

Answer: C – Explanation: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan. (SAARC also has 8, but with Sri Lanka and Maldives instead of China and Myanmar.)

3. The Hindu Kush Himalaya, holding the most ice outside the polar regions, is called the:

A) Roof of the World

B) Snow Crown

C) Asia's Water Tank

D) Third Pole

Answer: D – Explanation: It feeds great rivers like the Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra. 'Roof of the World' usually refers to the Pamirs/Tibetan Plateau.

4. 1. El Niño: warming of the equatorial Pacific (central/east).
2. El Niño strengthens the SW monsoon.
Which is/are correct?

A) 1 only

B) 2 only

C) Both 1 and 2

D) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: A – Explanation: Statement 1 is correct; El Niño usually weakens the south-west monsoon, so 2 is wrong. North India's winter rain and snow come from western disturbances.

5. Which monsoon gives Tamil Nadu about half of its annual rainfall?

A) North-east monsoon (Oct–Dec)

B) South-west monsoon (Jun–Sep)

C) Summer showers (Mar–May)

D) Winter rain (Jan–Feb)

Answer: A – Explanation: In El Niño years the north-east monsoon is often normal or above; the 1997 heavy rain and 2015 Chennai floods came in strong El Niño years.