

# Five million ravaged by floods in Pakistan

By Ali Ismail  
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Flash floods brought on by monsoon rains have killed over 130 people in Pakistan in recent weeks, with 87 people killed in Sindh province alone since August 31. The floods have already affected up to five million people across Pakistan, causing widespread damage in rural areas, particularly in Sindh and Balochistan where hundreds of thousands of homes have been damaged or destroyed.

The floods come one year after Pakistan experienced the worst natural disaster in its six-decade history. An estimated 2,000 people were killed and 21 million affected when devastating floods submerged as much as one-fifth of the country last summer. The floods caused an estimated \$10 billion worth of damage, the equivalent of more than 5 percent of Pakistan's annual GDP, destroying much of the country's inadequate infrastructure.

The 2010 floods were a socially produced disaster, resulting from the Pakistani bourgeoisie's failure to build and maintain an adequate flood-control system for the Indus River watershed and its incompetence and callous indifference to the plight of the working population.

Despite the destruction and misery wrought by last year's flood, Pakistani authorities failed to make flood-control and warning-systems a priority over the past year. Yet Monsoon floods are an annual occurrence in Pakistan.

The Pakistani people are once again paying a heavy price for this negligence. Islamabad has yet to declare an emergency and done little to provide urgently needed shelter, medicine and food supplies to the flood-affected districts.

Although the rains are expected to subside by end of the week, the flood-affected remain at risk of contracting diseases such as cholera and malaria.

"The floods triggered by heavy rains have killed 132 people and affected 4 to 5 million people," Zafar Qadir, head of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), told a press conference in Islamabad last Tuesday. According to the NDMA, most of those killed have died as a result of collapsing roofs, drowning, and water-borne diseases.

According to the NDMA, 9,367 villages have been submerged by floodwater in just seven districts of Sindh.

Approximately 700,000 houses have been damaged across the country, with about 250,000 homes completely destroyed. In search of shelter, over 150,000 displaced people have been forced to move to relief camps.

Gastroenteritis, the result of drinking contaminated water, has killed many people in flood-affected areas across Sindh. Children are especially vulnerable. Just in the last few days the disease has claimed the lives of at least 15 people in the rain-hit areas of Sukkur, Badin, and Naushahro Feroz and hospitalized hundreds of others.

"The victims said that even with the ongoing rain, the risk of death due to diseases would be considerably less if the authorities drained out the four-to-five feet of standing rainwater from their areas," reported *The News*. "They said that mosquitoes carry viral infection from the stagnant water, spreading malaria and other diseases. The victims demanded that the Public Health Department ensure the fumigation of the rain-affected areas as well as in the relief camps."

In Balochistan, two children were killed and three others injured last weekend when the roof of a mud house collapsed in the Nasirabad section of Loralai. And two children were killed in Duki last Thursday when their mud home collapsed on them.

Many villages in Balochistan have complained that authorities failed to repair the broken banks of outfall drains, despite having a full year since the 2010 flood to do so.

The floods have caused extensive damage to crops, including the cotton, date, and red chili crops. Some observers believe the floods may decrease cotton production, driving up its price. This would negatively impact Pakistan's textile sector, which has been badly hit by the country's electricity crisis. Over 100,000 cattle have also died due to the lack of fodder and medicine.

"The impact of the floods on the most marginalized and vulnerable sections of the society have primarily been the disruption of gainful employment and loss of food commodities due to the inundation," said Khalid Babbar, Executive Director of JAGGARTA Social Welfare Organisation, which operates in the southern Sindh districts of Mirpur Khas and Badin. Many of the people residing in

flood-affected areas are unable to afford food, according to Babbar. The price of vegetables and other food items have increased significantly in all the flood-affected areas.

Belatedly Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari has directed the NDMA to assess need in cooperation with provincial disaster relief authorities. Zardari, whose Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government is implementing yet another round of IMF austerity, is claiming farmers will be compensated for their lost crops. The Sindh provincial government, which is also led by the PPP, has earmarked 5 billion Pakistani rupees (\$57 million) for rescue and relief efforts in flood-affected areas. Flood-affected families in Sindh are to receive the paltry sum of 20,000 rupees (\$229), under conditions where they have been driven from the homes, have potentially lost their means of subsistence, and must fend with soaring food and fuel prices.

While millions of people have been affected by the floods and hundreds of thousands have lost their homes, only 18,000 tents and 40,000 ration bags have been sent to flood-affected areas according to an NDMA spokesperson.

The government's pitiful response to the crisis has already sparked protests in many parts of Sindh. In Sanghar District flood-affected people held a demonstration against the government's grossly insufficient response to the floods at Jamarao Mori near Khadro. Protestors burned tires and blocked traffic for two hours, the *Dawn* reported last Saturday.

The flood-affected in Badin District resorted to seizing aid packs from trucks on Saturday after local administrators abruptly halted their distribution. Baton-wielding police officers then charged the crowd, injuring four people including a woman. Villagers in Badin said encroachments on saline drains were responsible for the flooding. The drainage system was poorly maintained, with the drains not properly de-silted, reported local residents.

Additional protests are likely in the coming days, as the flood-affected grow increasingly frustrated and desperate with the government's unpreparedness and indifference.

Successive governments have failed to develop the infrastructure needed to cope with large-scale natural disasters. While Pakistan established the Federal Flood Commission (FFC) in 1977 to execute flood-control projects, the agency squandered most of its funds, leaving the country vulnerable to deadly flooding.

"Pakistan is a disaster prone country and has been flooded 67 times since 1947," stated an Oxfam report released last July. "... But while floods and earthquakes are inevitable, widespread devastation is not. For years, not enough has been done to protect ordinary Pakistani men, women and children from disasters before they strike."

Ordinary Pakistanis in flood-prone areas have often been

forced to pay bribes in exchange for flood-control and irrigation projects. During last year's floods, politicians from various parties and prominent landlords used their power and influence to have dykes breached and water diverted in such way as to protect their own lands, ensuring that the poorest layers of the population bore the brunt of the disaster.

A study by the American Geophysical Union conducted months after the floods revealed that, had Pakistan attempted to coordinate with European weather monitors at the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasting, it could have had advanced warning of the disaster and organized a mass evacuation. Instead, millions of people were left to fend for themselves as relief camps overflowed with hungry and desperate survivors.

According to Oxfam, 37,000 people who were displaced by the 2010 disaster are still residing in relief camps in Sindh. Most of the flood-affected in other parts of the country have since returned home, but many lack adequate housing and are forced to live in tents. More than 800,000 families remain without proper homes. Moreover, many of these families have again been displaced, at least temporarily, by this year's floods.

Despite last year's unprecedented devastation, the PPP-led government has steadfastly refused to take any serious steps to prevent similar disasters from occurring in the future. For example, embankments in Sindh were increased by only 2 or 3 feet rather than the recommended 6 feet. Pakistani authorities have failed to develop flood-resistant housing and have ignored several recommendations from the FFC, including recommendations to upgrade the country's Medium-Range Forecasting capacity from two to three days to 10 days, and to install additional weather radars in several districts in the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan.

Over the past two years, Pakistan's central government has spent more on the expenses of National Assembly members than on improving disaster management and prevention, thereby condemning millions of Pakistanis to continue to live at the mercy of the elements.

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