

**Pakistan Floods:
Coping with Disaster**

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Abstract

Pakistan is reeling under one of the biggest natural disasters in the history of the country, as large swathes of its territory lies under flood waters. While such floods are devastating under any circumstances, its adverse effects are more in a country like Pakistan that is battling Islamist insurgency, and has a fragile civilian government and a weak economy. This brief examines the challenges that Pakistan is facing in dealing with this calamity.

A Humanitarian Crisis

Pakistan has been hit by one of the worst natural disasters in its history as massive floods inundated large parts of its territory. Beginning in late July in the northern region of Pakistan, the flood waters have swept into all four provinces of the country resulting in an estimated 1,600 people losing their lives and a staggering 20 million people affected. Reports put the area of land affected by the floods as over one-fifth of Pakistan's territory. Comparisons have been drawn with recent natural disasters such as the 2004 Tsunami, which affected five million people, the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, which affected three million people and the Haitian earthquake, which affected three million.² The number of people affected by the Pakistan floods exceeds the total number affected by all three of these disasters put together.

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² 'Pakistan flood crisis bigger than tsunami, Haiti: UN' *The Dawn* (9 August 2010), www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/03-pakistan-flood-crisis-bigger-than-tsunami-haiti-un-ss-05. Accessed on 23 August 2010.

Beyond the human suffering and loss of lives, the floods have inflicted tremendous damage to property and infrastructure, including roads, railway lines, communication links and energy supply lines. Power plants and some gas fields have had to be closed down, leaving millions without power. In addition to the physical damage, Pakistan will have to cope with a body blow to its economy and deal with a brewing political crisis as Islamist insurgents gain an upper hand by being first in line to deliver aid and help the flood victims.

Challenges

Pakistan is already reeling under a weak economy and struggling with sectarian violence, extremism and political instability. The challenges posed by the floods are impossible to meet without international aid. There are several areas of urgent concern, including shelter, disease prevention, food supply, clean water, sanitation and social stability. Sanitation is a major problem in the aftermath of any natural disaster, but floods pose an additional problem as they facilitate waterborne diseases. The first cholera case was reported on 14 August 2010 in the Swat Valley. The United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), estimates that up to six million people, mainly children and infants, are at risk of contracting waterborne diseases such as cholera, typhoid and dysentery.

Food and water are in short supply, or non-existent in many parts. The floods have affected over 17 million acres of Pakistan's most fertile land. Food crops have been destroyed and large amounts of stored grains and food have been washed away in some regions. The shortage of food has caused severe inflation, making food unaffordable to the poor even outside the flood affected areas. Forecasts are that inflation will rise by 2 per cent due to the floods, from a projected 9.2 per cent to 11.5 per cent.³ The loss of cash crops such as cotton, rice, sugarcane and wheat is devastating to the economy. Estimates are that 1 per cent of GDP (gross domestic product) growth has been lost due to the floods, pushing it down from 4.1 per cent to 3.2 per cent.⁴ Inflationary pressures have forced the Central Bank to raise the interest rate from 12.5 per cent to 13 per cent, further adding to Pakistan's economic woes.

The shortage of food, water and medical supplies has fanned social unrest as desperation has driven people to looting and violence. Extremist organisations which have excellent grassroots networks have been highly effective in mobilising and distributing resources to help the flood victims. Pakistan has already been severely challenged by the rise of extremism and religious fundamentalism in its midst. The flood crisis and the government's slow response have given militant organisations, such as the Jamaat-ud-Dawah, a great

³ See Pakistan Country Report, Economist Intelligence Unit, *The Economist* (August 2010), p.9.

⁴ See Pakistan Country Report, Economist Intelligence Unit, *The Economist* (August 2010), p.8.

opportunity to win over the support of ordinary Pakistanis. The Jamaat-ud-Dawah, operating under the banner of Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation Pakistan, has set up many relief camps around the country.⁵ There is a real risk that the extremists may gain more popular support, which would be devastating for the government, which is already struggling to contain these radical groups.

The Pakistan government faces a monumental challenge. It has not been wholly successful in its war against militants and now looks to be losing the battle of hearts and minds. The timing of the floods could not have been worse, as it has come at a time when the Pakistan government was at war with insurgents in the flood hit areas. Pakistan's military has 60,000 troops stationed for disaster relief, but their effectiveness is severely restricted by the poor infrastructure in Pakistan which has been further eroded or completely destroyed by the floods. Failure to effectively deal with the flood crisis will damage the credibility of the government. As it is, Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari's decision to travel to Europe and not cut short his trip despite the mounting toll from the floods has been severely criticised.

On top of this, in the early days of the crisis, international aid did not appear to be forthcoming. Pakistani leaders were forced to compare the generous response to other crises such as the 2004 Tsunami and the Haiti earthquake, and question whether Pakistan was being unfairly treated. The slow international response may be explained by the fact that the international community did not fully appreciate the enormity of the crisis as initial media coverage was not intense and the number of dead was relatively small. It was only when the number of people affected was highlighted did the international perception of the crisis change. Some have suggested that Pakistan's image as a corrupt nation with sympathetic links to militant and terrorist organisations was a factor in the early apathetic response. There may have been concern that aid money could end up financing terrorist activity. However, once the true nature of the crisis was revealed, the international community has acted swiftly. The UN Secretary General convened a special session of the General Assembly to call for funds for Pakistan.

Moving Ahead

As of 20 August, US\$490 million had been committed and a further US\$325 million had been pledged, bringing the total to over 800 million dollars.⁶ Much of this money came from the West, especially the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK) and European Union.

⁵ 'Hard-line Islam fills void in flooded Pakistan', *The New York Times* (6 August 2010) www.nytimes.com/2010/08/07/world/asia/07pstan.html. Accessed on 24 August 2010.

⁶ Masood Haider and Baqar Sajjad Syed, 'Pledges exceed UN appeal: Qureshi' *The Dawn* (22 August 2010), www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/front-page/pledges-exceed-un-appeal-qureshi-280. Accessed on 23 August 2010.

This assistance is expected to rise in the days ahead. According to the OCHA, as of 25 August 2010, the US was in the lead with 25.1 per cent of total humanitarian assistance, with the UK and European Commission following at 10.4 per cent and 8.7 per cent respectively. Saudi Arabia was the next largest donor after the US with a share of 12 per cent.⁷ Many other countries have also contributed, including Australia, Denmark, Germany, Canada and China. Some have suggested that these western powers have a strategic interest in helping Pakistan, as they need a stable Pakistan to fight terrorism and maintain stability in the South Asian region. As compared to the contributions by the western powers, China's relatively smaller contribution of US\$9.2 million (1.5 per cent) is surprising, given its close relations with Pakistan. Contributions by some Gulf countries such as Kuwait and Oman (0.8 per cent) and Iran (0.1 per cent) have also been relatively low.

Regardless of the motive, the humanitarian crisis in Pakistan is overwhelming and this is not a time for national and international leaders to play politics. Aid must get through to the victims. More should also be done regionally. India has offered US\$5 million in aid and Pakistan has accepted it despite some opposition domestically. This is significant given the tension between the two countries and is a sign that pragmatism and good sense have prevailed. Bangladesh has also offered assistance, and is in some ways well placed to give technical assistance, given its extensive experience with floods. Finally, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation should be actively engaged and be used as a platform to coordinate regional relief efforts and share knowledge on disaster management. This is a time for nations to come together, putting aside their political and strategic differences and save the millions of innocent lives that have been put at risk by the floods.

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⁷ For a country wise break-up of total funds committed see United Nations office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UCHA), Pakistan Floods-July 2010 Table B: Total Humanitarian Assistance per Donor (Appeal plus other*) as of 25 August 2010, http://fts.unocha.org/reports/daily/ocha_R24_E15913___1008251044.pdf. Accessed on 25 August 2010.