

Hundreds die in severe flooding in western Pakistan

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More than 800 people have died in western Pakistan since early February due to flooding and landslides caused by heavy rain and snows. At least two million people have been affected in Balochistan and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) by the disaster, which left houses, roads, schools and hospitals severely damaged. Many of the victims are still waiting for government assistance and compensation.

A seminar on “Strategic Disaster Management” organised by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) on March 21 revealed that 561 people were killed in Balochistan province and 750,000 people were affected. The cost due to damaged or destroyed property and the loss of livelihoods was estimated at 670 million Pakistani rupees or about \$US11 million.

The first bout of heavy rain in Balochistan began in January and continued into early February. A major disaster occurred on February 11 when five dams, including the large Shadikor Dam, burst. Raging floodwaters swept away five villages and killed 250 people. Victims have blamed faulty construction and the failure of the national and provincial administrations to come to their aid.

There was heavy rain and flooding again in late March. According to the South Asia Media Net on March 24, flash floods over three days killed 21 people and inundated dozens of villages.

Throughout the province, there is extensive damage to water supply and sanitation systems, electricity supplies, roads, bridges and communication networks. More than 40,000 acres of land under cultivation have been destroyed—in some areas, up to 80 percent of the crop.

In the North West Frontier Province, the death toll is at least 363, with another 450 people injured. According to an International Red Cross Bulletin last

month, more than 24,000 houses have been destroyed and over 65,000 badly damaged across 24 districts. “Many are still in the need of basic necessities such as food and shelter,” the report stated. “Health authorities are concerned about the increasing cases of children with chest infections.”

In February, the government sent some 3,000 personnel from the military and civil emergency organisations to the affected areas to assist in relief work. Provincial authorities provided \$1 million to district administrations to provide relief supplies. But many affected areas of the North West Frontier Province had still received no assistance by April.

NWFP relief coordinator for UN agencies Dr Quaid Saeed recently told the IRIN website: “Despite official announcements, no steps have been taken so far to help the affected people and compensate for damage to houses, livestock and agriculture. The people are already poor and this year’s unexpectedly intense winter has exposed them to more difficult situations.”

Lack of sanitation and health facilities has raised the danger of waterborne disease. Pakistani health officials reported on Monday that at least six people have died from gastroenteritis after drinking water from the Hamal Lake. The deaths occurred in the southern Sindh province, but floodwaters from neighbouring Balochistan may have been responsible for contaminating the lake.

While the heavy rains and flooding are a natural disaster, governments at the national and provincial level have done nothing to prevent the disaster. Experts at the SDPI seminar on March 21 criticised the government’s disaster management. They called for “proactive approaches,” pointing out that “the number of victims is rising every year due to poor disaster management in the country”.

The 100-foot-high Shadikor Dam, which burst on February 11, was completed just two years ago. The BBC reported that locals are already asking how a dam completed barely two years ago to capture water for irrigation in a normally parched province could have failed with such devastating consequences.

An article in the *Dawn* newspaper explained: “[T]he dam [at Shadikor] was built by simply blocking the flood water, without proper spillways and fuses to protect the dam.” The danger was compounded by the haphazard construction of inadequate and dangerous makeshift earthen structures used by locals to trap water in the absence of a central water conservation plan.

In 1994, the government announced the privatisation of the national irrigation system. The Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) is about to be privatised. Private companies are involved in water conservation projects but these are of little assistance to poor farmers.

An Action Aid survey found that most farmers did not have the expertise, time or funds to manage water resources properly. “These farmers are so poor they cannot even repair their own house, let alone find money for lining canals,” it stated. Poor farmers were also the hardest hit by flooding.

While rich in natural resources, Balochistan is the country’s most impoverished province. The female literacy rate is under 15 percent and piped water is available to less than 5 percent of the population. In Gawadar district, for instance, 90 percent of the houses are made using mud, bamboo and chataee (a local material).

Poverty and social inequality have fuelled resentment and hostility in Balochistan and the NWFP. Local ruling elites have directed this anger against the central government, accusing the Punjabi-dominated military and bureaucracy of exploiting the natural resources for their own profit. Tensions have been further compounded by President Pervez Musharraf’s support for the US toppling of the Taliban regime in neighbouring Afghanistan, with which border tribes have close affinities.

In recent months, Balochi separatists have attacked Pakistani government installations and military personnel. Their leaders have strongly criticised governments, past and present, of stealing the

province’s resources and failing to assist in its economic development. Musharraf has responded by dispatching 20,000 security personnel, including 5,000 troops, to the province.

In the wake of the flooding, Musharraf flew to Balochistan and announced financial compensation for the victims. It was a hollow gesture. On his return to Islamabad, the president insisted that the disaster was exaggerated. He told state television in February: “There was no... flood there except the water kept collecting and people started shifting to higher grounds.”

Musharraf’s callous indifference to the plight of the victims reflects the fact that successive governments have failed to take any action to contain the impact of flooding. Flash floods are common in Pakistan where sudden downpours rapidly fill normally dry riverbeds in arid semi-desert country. The lack of proper planned water conservative projects leaves people vulnerable both to flooding and droughts.

In July and August 2003, severe floods affected the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan. The same year, floods killed 230 people in the northern provinces of Punjab and the NWFP. The official death toll from flooding in August 2001 stands at 210. On the other hand, 51 people starved to death as a result of a severe drought in 1999-2001 in Balochistan that also resulted in the loss of 7.9 million head of livestock.



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