

Hundreds killed in devastating Pakistani floods

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Hundreds of people have been killed in the worst monsoonal flooding in Pakistan for decades. While the Pakistani government has put the death toll so far at around 800, officials in the worst affected area—Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, previously known as the North-West Frontier Province—estimate a far higher figure of more than 1,500.

Mujahid Khan, provincial spokesman for the Edhi Foundation, which runs Pakistan's largest ambulance and rescue service, told the *New York Times* that the death toll could rise to 3,000. Pointing to the limited scope of the government and private relief response, he said that “only 5 percent of what is required” is reaching flood victims.

Adnan Khan, a disaster management official, also told the Associated Press on Sunday that “rescue workers have been unable to access certain areas, and the final death figures will be much higher.” Moreover, the danger is far from over. Pakistan's meteorological department has warned of possible further torrential monsoon rains that would only compound the crisis.

The extent of the disaster is only gradually coming to light. At least two million people have been forced to flee their homes as floodwaters have destroyed homes, roads, schools and hospitals. In just four districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province assessed by UN officials, 80,000 houses have been destroyed, another 50,000 damaged and nearly a million people—980,000—displaced.

Pakistani television footage has shown people desperately clinging to the walls and rooftops of damaged houses as water rushed through villages. Despite the deployment of troops and military helicopters, the rescue effort is proceeding slowly. Thousands of people are still trapped by the floodwaters and desperately need food,

clean water, shelter and other basic items.

Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani claimed Sunday that the government was taking the “proper steps for providing relief to the people of flood affected areas”. However, the *International News* reported: “Presently, thousands of people were sitting under open sky as their houses had been washed away... It was also learnt that due to lack of funds, district administrations had failed in providing relief to all affected people.”

Public anger is mounting over the relief effort. More than 300 people held a protest in Peshawar on Sunday, chanting slogans criticising the government over the lack of adequate shelter. Labourer Ejaz Khan told Agence France Presse: “I had built a two-room house on the outskirts of Peshawar with my hard-earned money but I lost it in the floods... The government is not helping us. The school building where I sheltered is packed with people, with no adequate arrangement for food and medicine.”

Speaking to the Associated Press, Sehar Ali Shah also criticised the government for not providing temporary shelter. “My son drowned, but I don't see the government taking care of us,” he said. “The government has not managed an alternate place to shift us.” In the Nowshera district, flood victim Faisal Islam exclaimed: “We need tents. Just look around!” He was sitting on the only dry ground he could find—a highway median strip—surrounded by hundreds of people in makeshift shelters constructed from dirty sheets and plastic sheeting.

Health officials are also warning about the danger of epidemics of water-borne diseases, such as cholera. Muhammad Ateeb Siddiqui, Red Crescent's director of operations, told the Associated Press: “We now need to

urgently distribute not only food but also the means to cook it. The distribution of relief is severely constrained by damaged infrastructure, and the widespread contamination of water supplies has the potential to create major health problems.” Oxfam’s humanitarian director, Jane Cocking, warned: “There is a desperate need for temporary shelter, clean drinking water and toilets to avert a public health catastrophe.”

In the midst of the disaster, criticism is being made of President Ali Asif Zardari’s decision to proceed with his planned trip to Europe. Naeem Khan, a flood victim in Nowshera, told the *Financial Times*: “The president has proven he doesn’t care about ordinary people. When Pakistanis are dying, it is the time for him to have stayed at home... Last week, I was looking forward to harvesting my three acres of sugar cane but now I have nothing left, absolutely nothing.”

The floods and the lack of relief threaten to further compound the political crisis facing the Pakistani government. There has been mounting public opposition to the Pakistani military’s proxy war on behalf of Washington against Islamist insurgents, as well as over worsening living standards. The Swat Valley, which was subjected to extensive army operations last year that drove hundreds of thousands of people from their homes, has been hit again in the latest flooding, with an estimated 14,600 homes and 22 schools damaged.

Popular anger will undoubtedly be further fuelled by the pittance in aid offered by the US administration for flood victims. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has promised an initial commitment of just \$10 million and emergency supplies. The figure is dwarfed by the amount spent on the war in neighbouring Afghanistan—last week the US Congress approved a bill for an additional \$US60 billion.

The flooding also threatens to compound the longer-term economic and social crisis facing millions of Pakistanis. Not only have thousands of homes been destroyed, but crops, livestock and infrastructure have been badly damaged or wiped out. Sports Minister Mir Shahnawaz Marri reported that 10 villages in Kohlu had been completely washed away and another 29 badly affected. President of Pakistan’s Chamber of Agriculture, Nasir Cheema, told the *New York Times* that the flooding could cut the national production of rice, sugar cane and

corn by between 10 to 15 percent.

To deflect criticism, the government has portrayed the flooding as an unavoidable natural disaster. The country’s weather bureau reported that north-western areas were hit by an “unprecedented” 312 millimetres of rain in 36 hours. While natural forces were certainly responsible for the deluge, the death and destruction could have been minimised through the proper planning and construction of infrastructure and the expansion of rescue and relief services.

Far from being unpredictable, monsoons are a regular feature of the region’s weather pattern on which agriculture depends heavily. Nor is this the first time that monsoonal flooding has devastated areas of Pakistan. In 1973, more than three million homes were destroyed and 160 people lost their lives. The 1976 floods demolished over 10 million houses and caused 425 deaths. Flooding in 1988 resulted in property damage amounting to 17 billion rupees (\$US200 million) and in 1992, 50 billion rupees. The official death toll in the 2001 floods was 210 and in 2003 in the provinces of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa it reached 230.

The need for an early flood warning system was recognised soon after the creation of Pakistan in 1947, according to South Asian Floods website, but the country’s forecasting system is still inadequate. The lack of planning for infrastructure to control flooding and provide prompt and comprehensive rescue and relief services has been glaringly exposed by the latest disaster. Any coordination across the region with India and Bangladesh—both of which are also regularly hit by floods—has been rendered impossible by national rivalries. The current tragedy in Pakistan is one more graphic example of the calamities produced by a social order based on private profit and the division of the world into capitalist nation states.



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