

Pakistani floods affect millions, but level of international aid pitiful

Vilani Peiris

11 August 2010

With monsoonal rains continuing, the worst flooding in Pakistan in 80 years is still spreading. Pakistani relief organisations and government agencies are stretched to the limit. Yet despite urgent appeals from the UN and other aid organisations, the level of international aid is pitiful, even measured against the limited assistance donated in other recent disasters.

According to the UN, more than 14 million people, including 6 million children, have been affected by flooding which has ravaged parts of all four provinces in Pakistan. In appealing for further international aid, UN officials pointed out that the number of people affected exceeds the combined total for the 2004 Asian tsunami, the 2005 earthquake in Kashmir and this year's earthquake in Haiti.

The death toll at nearly 1,700 is still comparatively low. However, many deaths are likely to be unrecorded. Large areas of the country have been cut off by landslides, washed away roads and bridges and flooding. The Swat Valley in the worst affected province—Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (formerly the North West Frontier Province)—is cut off, trapping an estimated 500,000 people. Most have received no relief supplies, except small quantities being transported into the areas by foot or donkey.

In other parts of the country, flooding is threatening major cities and towns. Thousands of people fled the city of Muzaffargarh in the province of Punjab yesterday after officials issued a flood warning that the swollen Indus and Chenab rivers had breached protective levees. A senior administration official, Inamullah Dhareejo, told the *Daily Times*: “People are heading towards Sukkur. It is a big human crisis. We don't know how many have come and how many more will come.”

The *Dawn* newspaper reported: “The announcement

from mosques [in Muzaffargarh] at 4 a.m. left speechless 400,000 residents of Muzaffargarh city, and the nearly 350,000 people who had taken refuge here after furious rivers had ripped homes from their foundations in small towns and villages nearby.” In Punjab, floods have already inundated over 1.45 million acres of cropped land and destroyed an estimated 44,000 houses.

Large areas of the southern province of Sindh are already under water. The Sukkur dam—one of several key dams being monitored by Pakistani authorities—is considered especially vulnerable, according to a report in the *Washington Post*. “Any breach could unleash a torrent of water that would wipe out entire towns and villages,” the article explained. “With floods bearing down, people were on the move, travelling by car, donkey and on foot to escape the danger zone. The evacuations include areas of Hyderabad, a city of 1.6 million people that is directly in the flood's path.”

Despite the immense scale of the disaster, international aid is only trickling in. As of Monday, according to the UN's financial tracking system, the funds committed by governments totalled less than \$US45 million, with an additional \$91 million pledged.

In a statement yesterday, the British-based Oxfam pointed out that in the first 10 days of the Kashmir earthquake, governments internationally had committed more than \$70 million and promised \$247 million. In response to this year's earthquake in Haiti, \$742 million was committed and \$920 million pledged. “The rains are continuing and [with] each hour that passes flooding is multiplying misery across the entire country. This is a mega disaster and it needs a mega response,” Oxfam country director for Pakistan, Neva Khan, said.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR) warned in a memo circulated yesterday that UN and international agencies were being “tested to the limits”. The UN Office for Humanitarian Affairs said yesterday that 6 million people needed “direct aid” for their survival. A World Food Program official told the media: “We’re expecting that about two million people will likely need help for at least three months.”

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, visiting the flooded areas in Sindh on Sunday, said that his cash-strapped government could not deal with the crisis. “The government has done everything possible but it is beyond our capacity, we are facing an extremely difficult situation,” he said. Pakistani authorities estimate that at least \$1 billion is needed in emergency aid and another \$5 billion to repair and rebuild homes, hospitals, schools, bridges, roads, rail lines and other infrastructure damaged or destroyed in the flooding.

By contrast the amounts of aid received from various governments are tiny, expressing their contempt and indifference for the plight of the oppressed masses in countries like Pakistan. The figures from the Pakistani government’s Economic Affairs Division on Monday include: \$22 million through the UN; \$60 million in goods and services and a \$10 million loan from the Islamic Development Bank; the United States \$10 million; Saudi Arabia \$10 million; the European Union \$10 million; Japan \$3.23 million; the United Kingdom \$10 million.

Yesterday, the US announced it was increasing its promised aid by \$20 million to \$55 million—a pittance in comparison to the billions of dollars spent each month to sustain the US-led occupations of neighbouring Afghanistan and Iraq. In February, US monthly spending on the war in Afghanistan reached \$6.7 billion, overtaking the \$5.5 billion for Iraq. The Pentagon, which has killed hundreds of Pakistani civilians in air strikes against so-called terrorist targets in areas bordering Afghanistan, has with great fanfare committed six helicopters to flood relief efforts.

In announcing the extra funds, Mark Ward, acting director of the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, declared that the aid would “show the flag” in Pakistan, where a majority of the population opposes the US war in Afghanistan and is hostile to the US. The US military helicopters are operating in the Swat Valley, which was an Islamic insurgent stronghold before Washington pressed the Pakistani government to

launch a major army offensive last year that turned hundreds of thousands of residents into refugees.

The Obama administration is also concerned that the flood disaster will compound the political crisis facing the fragile Pakistani government. President Asif Ali Zardari has already been widely criticised for proceeding with a trip to Britain in the midst of the disaster. Addressing a meeting of political supporters on Saturday, Zardari was confronted by protesters, one of whom hurled two shoes at him—a gesture regarded in Pakistan as a deep insult.

Signs of political unrest over the lack of government assistance are emerging inside Pakistan. Reuters reported yesterday that dozens of protesters in the southern town of Sukkur in Sindh accused politicians of ignoring flood victims. One protester, Salahuddin Ahmed, told the news agency: “They want to save their own lands and factories. They don’t care if Sukkur is drowned.”

On Sunday, the convoy of junior economic affairs minister Hina Rabbani was pelted with stones by angry victims in southern Punjab. Had she arrived a week ago, protesters told *Time*, they would have urged her to fix a hole in a nearby embankment, possibly saving many homes from flooding. Much of the area is now under water. Shehryar Mazari told the magazine that local politicians had tried to play down the scale of the impending disaster. “I don’t know why politicians lie, but they did. If we had known how bad it was going to be, we could have evacuated people in time, but now we have women and children hanging in trees, waiting for rescue,” he said.

The Pakistani government was already facing widespread hostility over its proxy war on behalf of the US against Islamist militants, and the country’s economic and social crisis. Now the floods have wiped out large areas of crops, destroying the livelihoods of many farmers and leading to higher food prices. As the flooding worsens, anger and protests will inevitably spread, compounding the crisis of a fragile regime.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact