

Pakistan floods affect 20 million people as disaster worsens

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The flood disaster in Pakistan is worsening with 20 million people or 12 percent of the population affected, according to the latest government estimates. After visiting the country on Sunday, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon described the devastation as the worst that he had ever seen. “In the past, I have witnessed many natural disasters around the world, but nothing like this,” he said.

“Thousands of towns and villages have simply been washed away. Roads, buildings, bridges, crops—millions of livelihoods have been lost. People are marooned on tiny islands with the floodwaters all around them. They are drinking dirty water. They are living in the mud and ruins of their lives. Many have lost family and friends. Many more are afraid their children and loved ones will not survive in these conditions,” Ban said.

Yet the amounts of international aid that have reached Pakistan are woefully inadequate. The UN has received only about a quarter of its \$US460 million emergency aid appeal. British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg branded the response as “absolutely pitiful”, but defended his government’s own limited aid. As of last weekend, the US and Britain had delivered emergency aid of \$22 million and \$27 million respectively with other G20 countries trailing well behind: Australia \$9 million; Canada \$2 million; China \$1.5 million France \$1.4 million; Germany \$2.4 million; Italy \$1.8 million; and Japan \$230,000.

Ban told reporters: “This disaster is far from over. The rains are still falling and could continue for weeks.” The government’s Flood Forecasting Division warned over the weekend of “exceptionally high” water levels in the Indus River at two dams in Sindh Province. Flood waters were likely to inundate low-lying areas of Jacobabad, Sukkur, Larkana and Hyderabad.

Three quarters of Jacobabad’s population of 300,000

have already fled for dry ground. Areas of the neighbouring district of Jaffarabad in Balochistan are already under water after a breach in the Sim Canal. The Pakistani-based *News* reported: “Hundreds of thousands of people including children, women and aged men have been trapped on the rooftops of their houses as floodwater with 5-foot depth has blanketed entire districts.”

The estimated death toll from the flooding is still around 1,600, but many areas of the country have not been reached and the actual figure may never be known. The UN is warning of a wave of deaths from disease and hunger.

“Up to 3.5 million children are at risk of deadly water-borne diseases such as watery diarrhoea and dysentery,” Maurizio Giuliano, a UN spokesman, told reporters. He estimated that 6 million people were in danger, noting that 36,000 cases of diarrhoea had already been reported. “We need to arrange for clean drinking water on an emergency basis, otherwise we will have a second wave of deaths,” Giuliano warned.

Medical workers have already expressed fears of an outbreak of cholera, which has similar symptoms to watery diarrhoea but is highly contagious. Cholera can lead to severe dehydration and death if not treated promptly. One case of cholera has already been confirmed in Mingora, the main town in the northern Swat Valley. Giuliano said that aid workers were treating all cases of acute watery diarrhoea as if it was cholera to try to minimise the danger of a deadly epidemic.

Pakistan’s emergency services, including the military, are already stretched to the limit in providing food and other essentials to areas cut off by floodwaters. The distribution is chaotic at best with food being dumped from helicopters and planes and no measures to ensure that it is either adequate or reaching all those in need. The Pakistan-based *Daily News* reported yesterday that five children had died of hunger in the flood-stricken district

of Kohistan in the northern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

The floods have had a devastating impact on agriculture. Speaking to reporters on Friday, World Bank President Robert Zoellick estimated crop damage at \$1 billion. The UN food agency reported that about 700,000 hectares of crops—mainly rice, maize, cotton, and sugar cane—had been damaged. In some areas, 80 percent of farm animals were dead. As well as making food scarce and expensive, flood damage could halve the projected country's growth rate of 4.5 percent, according to Pakistan's finance ministry.

The lack of government aid and international assistance is already provoking anger among flood victims. Hundreds of people blocked a major highway in the Sukkur area with stones and garbage yesterday to protest over the slow delivery of aid. Protestor Kalu Mangiani told the Associated Press that government officials only arrived to hand out assistance when the media was present. "They are throwing packets of food to us like we are dogs," he said.

Another protestor Mohammad Laiq told the BBC: "There seems to be no government here since the floods. We have lost our children, our livestock, we could hardly save ourselves. Though we have come here, we are getting nothing. Where is the government? What do we do? Where do we go?"

The indifference of the Pakistani government towards the plight of millions was summed up in President Asif Ali Zardari's decision to proceed with his trip to Europe earlier this month. After returning, he made his first visit to flooded areas on August 12. Fearing the outbreak of protests, his visit to the Sukkur area took place under tight security with only state-owned media allowed to report.

Zardari was already facing opposition as a result of his government's proxy war on behalf of Washington against Islamist insurgents in areas bordering Afghanistan. Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes after heavily armed troops launched offensives in the Swat Valley, South Waziristan and other areas from April last year. The government's austerity measures implemented at the behest of the International Monetary Fund have also provoked widespread anger.

Various commentators have begun to express concerns about the government's future. Marie Lall, an analyst at Britain's Chatham House, told the *Guardian*: "The immediate risk is one of food riots. There is already great resentment in Swat and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province where people had to be cleared during the government

offensive. Now there is the threat of social unrest as various factions, families and ethnic groups compete with each other in the event of a breakdown in government."

In comments cited by McClatchy Newspapers, *Friday Times* editor Najam Sethi commented: "The powers that be, that is the military and bureaucratic establishment, are mulling the formation of a national government, with or without the PPP [Zardari's Pakistan People's Party]... I know this is definitely being discussed. There is a perception in the army that you need good governance to get out of the economic crisis and there is no good governance."

The *Nation* also reported: "Fears that Asif Ali Zardari, the president, could be overthrown—possibly through an intervention by the army—have grown as the government's failure to adequately tackle the crisis has fuelled long-held grievances."

Concern about the Zardari government was undoubtedly a major factor behind the US response to the flood disaster. As well as promising \$76 million in aid, the Pentagon announced last Friday that a three-ship taskforce carrying 2,000 Marines, tilt-rotor aircraft, transport helicopters and relief supplies was sailing for Pakistan. US troops and helicopters have already been involved in relief operations—including in the sensitive Swat Valley.

The US military presence sets a precedent for an expansion of operations inside Pakistan, which previously had been opposed by the government and military fearing the eruption of protests. The overwhelming majority of Pakistanis oppose the US-led occupation of Afghanistan and US demands to extend the proxy war inside Pakistan itself. Even as the US relief operation is underway, there has been no let up in US missile strikes inside Pakistani territory—on Sunday, a drone attack in South Waziristan killed 13 people.



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