

As Pakistan drowns, Washington focuses on security threats

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As the toll of death and destruction in Pakistan from unprecedented flooding continues to mount, US government officials and the American media are raising concerns not over the colossal human tragedy, but over the potential threat to political stability and US security interests in the region, the focus of American military action for nearly nine years.

Flood victims on Monday and Tuesday blocked highways to demand state help and show their opposition to the government of President Asif Ali Zardari. Tens of thousands of villages have been inundated and there is little sign of aid, either from the government or from the huge and heavily armed Pakistani military apparatus.

According to a report by Reuters, “Dozens of stick-wielding men and a few women tried to block five lanes of traffic outside Sukkur, a major town in the southern province of Sindh. Villagers set fire to straw and threatened to hit approaching cars with sticks.”

One starving villager, Gul Hasan, told the news service, “We left our homes with nothing and now we’re here with no clothes, no food and our children are living beside the road.”

In Punjab, hundreds of villagers burned tires near Kot Addu, chanting, “Down with the government.”

In a front-page analysis Wednesday, the *Washington Post* wrote: “Staggered by the scale of destruction from this summer’s catastrophic floods, Pakistani officials have begun to acknowledge that the country’s security could be gravely affected if more international aid does not arrive soon.”

“All those factors have the potential to further destabilize a nation undermined by weak governance and a vicious insurgency even before the crisis,” the newspaper added.

A Pakistani military spokesman, Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas, told the *Post*, “There are already signs that people are restive. If not addressed, it could balloon and will create a security situation in the areas where the government has not taken care of people’s needs.”

US Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, arrived in Pakistan Wednesday after a

previously planned visit to Kabul, the Afghan capital, and declared his concern that the flooding could destabilize the Pakistani regime and create an opening for Islamic fundamentalist groups allied with the Taliban.

In a sign of the priorities of both Washington and Islamabad, the Pakistani military has not deployed any active-duty troops on flood relief, using only reserves and troops assigned to training, rather than military operations.

For the US government, the leading aid donor with a derisory \$90 million—one one-thousandth of the amount expended this year on the war in neighboring Afghanistan—the principal concern is the potential repercussions in the border region, the target of relentless US missile strikes even during the worst of the flooding.

The commandant of the US Marine Corps, General James T. Conway, called on Pakistan’s army chief of staff, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, at general headquarters in Rawalpindi Wednesday. While Conway brought perfunctory condolences on the flooding, the Pakistani press said that “during the course of the meeting with General James T. Conway they discussed issues pertaining to national security, war against terrorism, defense needs, etc. at length.”

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was to announce an additional pledge of aid during a special session of the United Nations General Assembly Thursday devoted to the Pakistan flood disaster. A State Department spokesman said the meeting “will be an opportunity to express solidarity and to further mobilize support of member states and the international community for the situation in Pakistan.”

The flood waters are rolling south through some of the most densely populated land on the planet, the valley of the Indus and its tributary streams, all of them swollen by record monsoon rains. All four of Pakistan’s provinces—Khyber Pakhtunwa (formerly the Northwest Frontier Province), Punjab, Baluchistan and Sindh—have suffered severe damage.

In Punjab alone, the most populous state, an estimated 8.5 million are homeless. The total number homeless is at least

20 million, with tens of thousands of villages under water. Rising floodwaters have reached Sindh, the southernmost province, where the Indus flows into the Indian Ocean, with towns in the northwest part of the province, near the border with Baluchistan, placed on high alert.

The European Union's international aid commissioner, Kristalina Georgieva, announcing a \$39 million increase in aid, said that Pakistan was now facing "two disasters in one." In the northern highlands, she explained, the "internally displaced population has already been devastated by conflicts and they are now hit very hard again by the flash floods; this is where most of the loss of life has occurred."

Georgieva continued: "In the southern lowlands where the floods have expanded—especially in the last days—and where the country relies on agricultural land to feed its people, poor rural and vulnerable populations are affected by the slow but steady rise of the water."

The death toll in the northern area has been estimated at 1,600. The Pakistan government has not increased the estimated death toll as countless villages have been inundated in the center and south of the country, leading to fears that a huge additional loss of life will be reported once the flood waters recede.

There is also mounting concern that contagious diseases like cholera will break out in the aftermath of the disaster, as tens of millions of people are compelled to drink contaminated water, since they are being provided no alternative.

A total of 62,000 square miles, one fifth of the entire land surface of Pakistan, is now under water. The economic damage is colossal. According to one account, rains destroyed 500,000 tons of wheat, ruined 300,000 acres of animal fodder, and killed 100,000 head of livestock. More than 1.5 million acres of crops have been damaged, including wheat, corn, cotton and sugar cane.

Pakistan is the third largest wheat producer in Asia, but consumes nearly all that it produces. Cotton production supplies the domestic textile industry, which will now have to import cotton, driving up costs. Ninety percent of the rice stockpile and rice harvest have been damaged.

The major world powers are maneuvering to advance their own economic, political and strategic interests, regardless of the consequences for the Pakistani people. The United States, Russia, China, the European Union and India, each in its own way, places the advancement of national interests far above the task of aiding tens of millions of people.

The total international aid pledged to Pakistan remains a tiny fraction of the amounts provided to Haiti after the January 12 earthquake this year, or to Indonesia and Sri Lanka after the 2004 post-Christmas tsunami, although the

total number of people affected is far larger than all the other disasters of the last decade combined.

The charity Oxfam reported that its donors committed \$742 million in aid and a further \$920 million in pledges within 10 days of the Haitian quake. For Pakistan in the same ten-day period, the figures were \$45 million and \$91 million, although five times as many people are affected. Pakistan's high commissioner to Britain, Wajid Shamsul Hasan, said the cost of rebuilding could reach up to \$15 billion.

In listing the contribution of US helicopters to flood relief, a State Department report effectively admitted the token character of the effort. A total of 21 US military and civilian aircraft have been deployed, 18 of them already in Pakistan when the flooding began. "US helicopters have evacuated 5,912 people and delivered 717,713 pounds of relief supplies," the report said—meaning that one in every 4,000 flood victims has been the beneficiary of American aid.

Russian President Dmitri Medvedev met with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, as well as Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the president of Tajikistan, at Medvedev's vacation home at the Black Sea resort of Sochi. The previously scheduled meeting had been called to discuss Russian concerns over terrorism and drug trafficking stemming from the Afghan battlefield, but Medvedev also made a token offer of flood relief.

It was the second trip by Zardari to a posh European destination since the flooding began, and is certain to intensify the popular hostility to the Pakistani president. Earlier, Zardari refused to cut short his visit to Britain and France, which included a stopover at his family's luxurious chateau in Normandy.

Britain was the only major European power to give any significant aid during the first week of the disaster. The European Commission, which represents the EU as a whole, provided less than one percent of the total aid to Pakistan, according to Oxfam.

China, a major strategic partner of Pakistan, particularly against India, has offered only a modest sum of aid, while India, in its turn, offered the least—a total of \$5 million, mainly in the form of rice.



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