

# Millions of Pakistani flood victims face continuing crisis

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After a two-day session of the UN General Assembly ended yesterday, the amount of international aid pledged for Pakistani flood victims still fell well short of the \$US460 million in emergency aid that the UN has appealed for. For all of the cynical displays of concern for the fate of the Pakistani people at the UN meeting, the issue of aid was dominated by the narrow self-interest of the major powers.

Addressing the UN on Thursday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the US would contribute an additional \$60 million in aid to Pakistan, bringing its total to more than \$150 million, of which about \$92 million would go to the UN. In calling for other countries to do more, she declared: “I realise that many countries, including my own, are facing tough economic conditions and very tight budgets ... But we must answer the Pakistani request for help.”

Washington’s aid effort, however, is not motivated by concern for the estimated 20 million Pakistanis impacted by the floods. Rather the Obama administration is driven by the need to prop up the Pakistani government of President Asif Ali Zardari, on which the US relies to wage a proxy war on Islamist insurgents in areas bordering Afghanistan. US officials have warned that organisations sympathetic to the Islamist fighters might gain in influence as a result of government and international inaction on the floods.

As for “very tight budgets”, the Obama administration’s offer of aid is a pittance compared to the trillions of dollars spent to fund the bailouts of US banks, financial institutions and corporations during 2008-09. In fact, the White House is implementing austerity measures against working people in the US and provides limited aid to Pakistani flood victims precisely because it has taken massive corporate bad debts onto the government’s books. At the same time, Obama can find tens of billions of dollars to escalate the US-led war in Afghanistan.

US Senator John Kerry underscored the purpose of American aid when he visited an airbase in Pakistan where US Marines and Pakistani soldiers are flying joint relief missions into the isolated northern Swat Valley. “The

objective is humanitarian,” he said, “but obviously there is a national security interest. We do not want additional jihadis, extremists, coming out of a crisis.” The US is using the disaster to consolidate ties with the Pakistani military, which launched a major offensive last year into the Swat Valley against Islamist groups.

Washington has also used the floods to take a diplomatic swipe at Beijing. Speaking after an Asia Society forum on Thursday, Richard Holbrooke, the US special envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, told reporters: “I think the Chinese should step up to the plate. They always say that Pakistan is their closest ally, and vice versa.” The following day, China’s UN ambassador Li Baodong defended his country’s aid to Pakistan, announcing an additional 50 million yuan (\$US7.4 million) in assistance. The US has recently increased the pressure on China over a range of issues—including over disputed claims in the South China Sea and joint US-South Korean naval operations in the Yellow Sea.

The Obama administration also pressed the Pakistani government to accept a token \$5 million in aid from its longstanding regional rival, India. Pakistan only reluctantly accepted the money—as a matter of prestige and also because India continues to demand tougher measures to crack down on insurgents in disputed Kashmir. The US has been seeking to ease tensions between the two rivals to boost its own influence and to enable the Pakistani military to widen its offensives in areas bordering Afghanistan.

Despite the increased amounts of aid pledged over the past two days, UN humanitarian chief John Holmes told Associated Press yesterday that the UN’s appeal was not fully funded. “At the moment, we’re about 70 percent funded, about \$350 million,” he said. But Holmes stressed that the various promises had to be turned into “real money” to buy food, tents, medicines and water purification tablets. His comment simply underscores the fact that in previous international disasters many international “pledges” have failed to materialise.

Pakistan’s UN ambassador Abdullah Hussain Haroon

thanked UN members for the increased aid but stressed that the flooding in Pakistan was “one of the greatest calamities ever to befall mankind.” About one third of the country has been affected and, according to Pakistani foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, now far exceeds the country’s previous worst “mega flood” in 1919.

Estimates of the number of dead have remained at about 1,500 to 1,600 for over a week. However, as Pakistani ambassador Haroon acknowledged, the real death toll is simply unknown because many villages and towns are still cut off by the flood waters. “We don’t know how many are dead and how many have perished,” he told UN delegates. “We can only hold our breath and hope that casualty figures have been fewer.”

Leading Pakistani meteorologist Arif Mahmood warned on Wednesday that floodwaters “won’t fully recede until the end of the month, and existing river torrents were still heading to major cities such as Hyderabad and Sukkur in the south.”

As the disaster entered a third week, the UN updated the number of homeless to 4.6 million on Thursday—up from an earlier estimate of 2 million. The number of people in urgent need of food was increased to 6 million. “This is a rough estimate and includes hundreds of thousands still on the move,” UN spokesman Maurizio Giuliano said.

Martin Mogwanja, UN head of humanitarian relief coordination in Pakistan, warned: “If [aid is] not provided soon enough, there could be a second wave of death caused by waterborne diseases such as gastroenteritis and acute waterborne disease.” Many hospitals and medical camps have been overwhelmed. The World Health Organisation has reported that only about 1.2 million of the 6 million people in need have access to safe water supplies.

Pakistani officials have reported that about 800,000 to 900,000 homes have been destroyed or made unliveable. The worst affected areas are in the north and northwest of the country—in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa [previously the North West Frontier Province]—which were the first to be hit. About 70 percent of bridges and roads have been destroyed and many towns and villages are cut off.

There are real fears in Islamabad, and in Washington, that the catastrophe will provoke a backlash against the government. Pakistani foreign minister Qureshi warned in New York on Thursday: “If we cannot deal with it [the flood emergency] there are chances of food riots leading to violence being exploited by people who are known”—a reference to Islamist organisations and insurgents.

Several incidents point to rising popular anger. Agence France Presse reported that when Pakistani President Zardari and US Senator Kerry arrived together at a camp in Jampur

town in Sindh province, people spoke of their “dissatisfaction over sluggish relief efforts”. A young person waving his national identity card before Zardari shouted: “I got nothing”.

On Wednesday, Britain’s international development secretary Andrew Mitchell and Conservative Party chairwoman Baroness Sayeeda Warsi were forced to retreat by angry protesters from an area in the country’s northwest. Mitchell told a news conference: “We came back to Islamabad by a circuitous route. The ministerial party had to be re-routed to avoid a large, ongoing public protest as a precaution.”

Opposition is certain to increase as the floods continue and the lack of government assistance becomes more acute. Even if the UN appeal for \$460 million were completed, it is only enough to cover the bare essentials for the millions in need for three months. The cost of longer-term reconstruction aid for devastated cities, towns and villages is likely to run into the tens of billions. According to aid agency estimates, around \$10 billion will be needed to help Haiti to recover from this January’s earthquake and the Asian tsunami recovery effort over the past five years required about \$13 billion. The cost of rebuilding in Pakistan is likely to be even higher.

Even if reconstruction aid and loans do eventuate, the money will not be sufficient to lift the millions of Pakistani affected out of poverty and economic backwardness and provide them with a decent standard of living. Nor will the necessary measures be taken to ensure that future disasters will be averted. Five years after the Asian tsunami devastated much of the Sri Lankan coastline, thousands of families who lost their homes are still living in squalid temporary accommodation.



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