

Pakistan floods displace another million people

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More than a million additional people fled their homes in the southern Pakistani province of Sindh over the past few days as flood waters threatened further cities and towns. While authorities reported yesterday that waters were receding at least temporarily, large areas of the country are devastated and around 20 million people displaced.

Nineteen out of the 23 districts in Sindh are badly affected. “More than seven million people have been displaced in Sindh since August 3, one million only in the past two days,” provincial relief commissioner Ghulam Ali Pasha told Agence France Presse (AFP).

Floodwaters inundated the town of Sujawal on Sunday, forcing its 100,000 residents to flee. Local authorities attempted to minimise the impact but water levels in the town centre were up to 1.5 metres and over 3 metres in surrounding villages. Disaster management official Hadi Baksh told the *Daily Times* that half a million flood victims were camped at Makli. Most lacked any shelter and were in desperate need of food and clean water.

At the nearby city of Thatta, locals and army personnel worked frantically over the weekend to build and maintain makeshift levees to defend the town. Most of the population of 300,000 had already left. The city was relieved yesterday as waters began to recede.

“The breach [in the levees] near Thatta has been half-plugged and fortunately the flood has also changed its course,” a local official told AFP.

Throughout the country, millions of people are struggling to survive in squalid conditions. “The

magnitude of this crisis is reaching levels that are even beyond our initial fears, which were already leaning toward what we thought would be the worst,” Maurizio Giuliano, a UN spokesman said Friday. “The number of those affected and those in need of assistance from us are bound to keep rising... About one month from the onset of the floods, we don’t know when we will see their end, as the disaster is still unfolding.”

The relief effort remains pitifully inadequate. A major issue has been transport. Marcus Prior, a spokesman for World Food Program (WFP), commented: “People are in need of food staples to survive. There is currently no other way to reach these flood victims other than by helicopter.” Nasibullah Bazai, an official in Balochistan province, told the *Dawn* that emergency workers “need more helicopters and boats” to rescue stranded people whose numbers were increasing.

The Pentagon has supplied 15 helicopters and three C-130 aircraft to assist in relief efforts and promised on Friday to send 18 more helicopters, which will only arrive in mid-September. Washington’s main concern is the suppression of Islamist insurgents operating from Pakistan against the US-led occupation of neighbouring Afghanistan. Another CIA drone attack in the Kurram border area last Saturday left at least 5 people dead and several injured.

The situation facing children is critical. Karen Allen, a representative of the United Nations Children’s Fund, told the media: “The flooding has surrounded millions of children with contaminated water. Most have nothing else to drink. We fear the deadly synergy of waterborne diseases, including diarrhoea, dehydration, and malnutrition”.

Martin Mogwanja, a humanitarian coordinator in Pakistan, warned: “If nothing is done, an estimated 72,000 children, currently affected by severe acute malnutrition in the flood-affected areas, are at high risk of death.” Wolfgang Herbinger, WFP country representative, said: “For the very youngest children, access to specialised food products could mean the difference between life and death in the coming weeks.”

Amal Masud, a spokeswoman for the National Disaster Management Authority, warned that a “significant” increase in the death toll is expected in coming weeks as waters begin to rise. Authorities have no accurate estimates of the number of people missing amid the chaos caused by the movement of millions. The current official death toll has climbed to 1,639.

Anti-government anger is growing. “The government has done nothing,” a worker told Reuters. “We don’t want their help anymore. We can only rely on ourselves.” In an interview with Al Jazeera, a resident fleeing Thatta said: “The government has not told the people where to go or what to do. It is the most incapable government I have ever seen.”

An editorial in the *Dawn* on Friday warned: “Although the worst floods in Pakistan’s history are ravaging the country, our parliamentarians’ behaviour does not appear to be in sync with the nation’s sentiments. With millions without food and shelter, the people’s representatives should be rising to the challenge instead of indulging in the kind of confrontation now developing in the National Assembly.”

Expressing the government’s nervousness, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani lashed out at media criticisms about the government’s lack of credibility. In a television interview on Thursday, Gilani exclaimed: “Had there been an issue of credibility, would they [the IMF and World Bank] still be providing us the funds?”

Gilani’s remark, however, simply underscores the government’s fragility. Last week it sought an easing of conditions from the International Monetary Fund

over the release of the sixth instalment of an \$US11 billion emergency loan negotiated in 2008 to avert a sovereign default. Despite the widespread devastation caused by the flooding, IMF officials are insisting on maintaining key pro-market reforms—including ending power subsidies and raising indirect taxes—that will hit working people in Pakistan hard.

Prior to the flooding, the government was already facing serious economic problems with high levels of debt and also mounting popular opposition as a result of deteriorating living standards. While millions of people are just trying to survive at present, anger against the government over its lack of assistance is certain to rise.

Senator John Kerry voiced the concerns in Washington over the political impact of the flood disaster in a comment yesterday in the *International Herald Tribune*. “A stable and secure Pakistan, based on democracy and the rule of law, is in all our interests,” he wrote. “Pakistan has made enormous strides in combating extremism and terrorism—at great sacrifice. But its ability to keep up the fight requires an effective response to this crisis.”

In other words, the limited US aid to Pakistan is to prop up the government and ensure that it continues the military’s proxy war against Islamist insurgents along the border with Afghanistan. Like the rest of the international donors, the US is using the disaster facing millions of people to prosecute its own strategic interests in the region.



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