Pakistani floods: A man-made not a natural disaster

Wije Dias
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The tragedy unfolding in Pakistan as a result of the country's worst floods in 80 years is a devastating indictment not only of the present Pakistani government, but of its international allies—the US in particular—and the profit system as a whole. While the torrential rains have been caused by natural forces, the human disaster has been compounded by decades of government neglect and the lack of planning and infrastructure.

National Disaster Management Authority head Nadim Ahmed yesterday put the number of people affected so far at 12 million, with 650,000 homes destroyed over some 132,000 square kilometres. The official death toll is 1,500 and rising. Hundreds of thousands of people are still stranded without shelter or supplies of food and clean water.

The floodwaters that have already savaged northwestern Pakistan are surging down the Indus river system towards the country's south. At least 70 towns and villages have been inundated over the past 48 hours. Half a million people have been evacuated and 11 districts in Sindh are on the danger list. Weather forecasters are predicting further heavy rains, raising the prospect of even more flooding.

Already there is widespread anger over the absence of warnings or preparation and the utter inadequacy of the rescue and relief effort. Scores of news articles report flood victims huddled in makeshift shelters criticising the government for failing to provide even elementary aid. Referring to Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari's current trip to Britain, columnist Ayesha Tammy Haz commented: "When he returns to Pakistan, there's going to be a river of resentment brimming over, just as high as his brimming smile."

Opposition politicians and the media have lambasted Zardari for failing to cancel his European trip while millions suffer in Pakistan. "It is disgusting to see Zardari going on a joy ride when people here expected the president to stand with the nation at its hour of grief," opposition lawmaker Ahsan Iqbal told the *Washington Post*. Already accused of indifference, Zardari declared after meeting British Prime Minister David Cameron that "storms will come and storms will go"—referring to troubled British-Pakistani relations—but the choice of words was highly insensitive, to say the least.

Undoubtedly Zardari's decision to proceed with his visit reflects the disdain and contempt of the ruling elites towards the country's impoverished masses. But it also points to the deeper political crises wracking his government, which is already despised for its proxy war against Islamist militants on behalf of Washington, and austerity policies dictated by the International Monetary Fund that have compounded the social crisis facing tens of millions.

Zardari rushed off to Britain to patch up relations after the British prime minister pointedly criticised the Pakistani government for "looking both ways" when it came to "terrorism". The criticism was all the more bitter because Cameron was speaking during an official visit to Pakistan's neighbour and regional rival, India. While reaffirming close ties, Cameron's comments were part of efforts being led by the US to pressure Zardari to intensify the military's unpopular war in the border areas with Afghanistan.

Zardari is already walking a political knife-edge—dependent on American political, economic and military support on the one hand, but facing widespread popular opposition over the US-led military operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan. According to a poll last month by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, only 20 percent of Pakistanis regarded Zardari positively, down from 64 percent when he came to office two years ago. In addition, 59 percent described the US as an enemy and only 17 percent had a favourable view of the US.

In the flood-affected areas of Pakistan that have already been embroiled in war—such as the Swat Valley—the levels of

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disgust and anger are certain to be much higher. Just over a year ago, the Pakistani military poured more than 20,000 troops into the Swat Valley and neighbouring areas in a bid to crush Islamist militias. At least two million people were displaced, with hundreds of thousands forced to shelter in overcrowded and squalid refugee camps. Now many of these people face the same situation again.

The overriding concern in Washington over the flooding has been with its potential impact on the so-called AfPak war. Commentators have warned of the danger that Islamist organisations could take advantage of the government's limited relief operation to gain support by offering their own aid. Others have urged the Obama administration to exploit the opportunity to boost the image of the US by providing assistance.

These cynical calculations recall the comments of US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice following the December 2004 tsunumi that devastated Sri Lanka, Indonesia and other countries, leaving hundreds of thousands dead and millions homeless. Rice declared that the tragedy represented "an opportunity" for the US to lift its profile. In Sri Lanka, the Bush administration used the tsunami to deploy American troops to the island for the first time, and to consolidate ties with the Sri Lankan military.

Likewise the Obama administration's aid is driven by US strategic interests. Significantly, US military helicopters have been deployed to flood-affected areas inside Pakistan. To maintain a semblance of independence, the Pakistani government and military have previously limited the presence of American military forces inside the country. As for humanitarian aid, the US has promised a pittance—lifting the initial pledge of $US10 million to just $US25 million on Thursday. By contrast, the US Congress last week approved an additional $60 billion for military operations in neighbouring Afghanistan.

The disaster in Pakistan is the product of years of neglect. Monsoons are an annual event and floods occur regularly, yet successive governments have failed to develop proper flood warning systems and flood control measures. Infrastructure has not been planned to deal with natural disasters, whether the current flooding or the devastating 2005 earthquake in Kashmir. As in the case of Hurricane Katrina in the US in 2005, and the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, rational planning is impossible under a social order dominated by private profit and the anarchy of the market. Those worst affected are inevitably the poorest layers of society.

Responsibility for the flood catastrophe should certainly be sheeted home to the Pakistani government and political establishment. But the impoverished character of countries like Pakistan is also the product of more than a century of imperialist oppression. The social gulf between rich and poor has been exacerbated over the past three decades by the globalisation of production and the transformation of Pakistan into a cheap labour platform. In the wake of the global economic crisis, international finance capital is demanding savage cuts to government spending that will only lead to a further deterioration of social infrastructure.

Moreover the communal partition of British India in 1947 into Muslim Pakistan and predominantly Hindu India has placed insuperable barriers before the establishment of a comprehensive flood management system for these rivers that cross the national borders. While the two rivals continue their bitter dispute over control of the Indus River, flooding has hit, not only Pakistan but now Indian-controlled Kashmir, where at least 100 were killed yesterday.

The latest disaster is another tragic demonstration of the incompatibility of the profit system with the elementary needs of ordinary working people. The only solution is an internationalist and socialist one—the independent mobilisation of workers in Pakistan and throughout South Asia and the globe to abolish capitalism and replace it with a world planned socialist economy that will consciously allocate the resources necessary to minimise the impact of natural events such as floods and earthquakes.

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