

Flooding crisis worsens in Pakistan

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17 September 2010

There are signs that Pakistan's flood crisis is worsening, with reports of new flooding in the southern province of Sindh. Even by official estimates, hundreds of thousands more people have been made homeless by floodwaters in the past four days, particularly in the Dadu district.

Some 250,000 people have been threatened by rising water levels in Lake Manchar, the largest freshwater lake in Pakistan. There was an immediate danger for more than 70 villages and cities, but by Wednesday, the rescue operations were yet to evacuate 50,000 people who were stranded and running out of food.

An unprecedented crisis is unfolding, exposing the indifference of President Asif Ali Zardari's government and the global powers toward the population. Seven million people are now directly affected in Sindh alone, according to UN, while the countrywide figure has increased to 21 million. Seventy percent are children and women, the most vulnerable layers of society.

The floods first struck at the end of July following heavy monsoon rains in the northwest. The floodwaters surged down the Indus River, submerging one-fifth of Pakistan at their peak—an area larger than England. More than 1.8 million houses have been damaged or destroyed, and at least 6 million people require urgent assistance to survive the next few months. In some areas, officials warn that it could take up to six months for the water to fully recede.

The Irish aid agency GOAL (Go On Give A Lot) warned on Monday of a “massive wave of child mortality” over the next two months. “The dietary requirements of children are being completely overlooked and there is little or no treatment currently available for those falling ill,” its head of programs, Jonathan Edgar, said. “The situation is deteriorating fast.”

Screening conducted by the agency of 260 children in displaced people's camps found an “average acute

malnutrition rate of 40 percent among children under five, with over half (23 percent) of these already in the later stage of the illness with severe wasting. Another screening of 23 randomly selected children found “nine had severe malnutrition and were unlikely to survive”.

GOAL said the results were “enough to set the alarm bells ringing,” while warning that worse outcomes could be expected among the millions of children living without shelter and stranded in remote areas.

All over Pakistan, pools and small lakes left behind by the floods are providing ideal breeding grounds for mosquitoes carrying the parasite that causes malaria. Dr Naeem Durrani, a malaria specialist for the medical charity Merlin, told the media: “We must be prepared to respond to as many as two million cases of malaria over the next four months in all areas that are mildly or severely flood affected.” He warned that the death toll from the illness could be as high as 40,000.

The Associated Press cited a World Health Organisation (WHO) estimate that 32,000 of the half million flood-affected pregnant women who are due to give birth in the next six months would have complications. WHO's head of maternal and child health in Pakistan, Dr Ahmed Shadoul, described the situation as “grave” and remarked that “those affected are the poorest people and those who are also living in remote areas which are not accessible.”

Before the floods, 320 women died for every 100,000 live births in Pakistan. The UN Population Fund last week stated: “Trauma, malnutrition and poor hygiene make flood victims more vulnerable”. Every day, some 1,700 women will go into labour, and “more than 250 of them will experience complications that call for lifesaving medical intervention” that is simply not available.

International aid has fallen far short of what is required. The UN has raised only \$US307 million, or just 63 percent of its fund appeal, and is yet to launch a

new appeal, despite the urgency. Valerie Amos, the UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, commented: “I am particularly worried about the scale of the response here. I am worried that we need a lot more people on the ground and I am also worried that we don’t have enough money to do what we need to do to avert what could become an even more difficult crisis.”

Despite the calamity facing millions of people, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is demanding strict fiscal discipline, which means stripping back welfare programs and basic services. The IMF has not only insisted on strict budget deficit control but an immediate end to government borrowing from the central bank, the State Bank of Pakistan.

The IMF informed the Pakistan government this month that the sixth instalment of the 2008 IMF standby loan agreement would not be released until IMF economic targets were met. An interim emergency assistance plan was suggested until the end of the year, but there has been no indication of when any funds would be released.

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has outlined plans to spend 40 billion rupees or about \$467 million to assist flood victims. The figure amounts to 20,000 rupees or about \$234 for each affected family. Only 400 families in Sindh and Punjab provinces have so far received that amount, while just 400 million rupees, or \$4.67 million, has been distributed in poverty-stricken Balochistan province.

By contrast, the government increased the defence budget this year by 17 percent to \$5.2 billion. Much of that increase has been spent on military operations demanded by Washington to suppress Islamist insurgents in areas bordering neighbouring Afghanistan.

“This is a war for peace and the development of the world, and Pakistan is determined to confront terrorism,” the prime minister told the media on Sunday. In this “war for peace,” US drone attacks continue to kill more people in the border regions of Pakistan, taking the lives of at least 60 people this month alone.

During a visit to flood areas this week, Richard Holbrooke, the special US envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan, made an effort to counter the growing hostility to the US—59 percent of the population now

views the US as an enemy, according to a recent Pew Research poll. Holbrooke claimed that the US had provided more aid than any other country.

At the same time, Holbrooke stated that much of the \$261 million donated by Washington for relief and recovery would be diverted from existing US aid programs. He then declared: “The international community is not going to be able to give all the money you need. It is just too large. Your country has to figure out how to raise enough revenues to pay for these projects.”

Manzoor Ali Shaikh, the senior government official in Thatta, the district that Holbrooke visited, told the US envoy that more food, water and shelter were needed for the 500,000 displaced people camping out in the area. He also warned that the lack of proper sanitation was a “time bomb” of disease waiting to explode.

The Obama administration’s only concern, however, is to shore up the Pakistan government so that it can continue the military offensives, while trying to prevent the inadequate response to the floods from fuelling further social unrest and political turmoil.



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