

International aid for Pakistan flood victims grossly inadequate

Tom Peters
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Six weeks after Pakistan was first hit by the most devastating floods in its history, the United Nations held a high-level ministerial meeting on Sunday to discuss its latest call for \$2 billion in international aid. The appeal, described as “urgent” by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, followed a previous UN call in August for \$460 million. As of last Friday, \$434 million in aid had been actually provided.

The representatives of the major powers used the gathering to posture as champions of the suffering Pakistani people, but the \$2 billion appeal, even if fully funded, would constitute only a tiny fraction of what is needed. Pakistan’s government estimates the damage to crops and infrastructure alone at \$43 billion—almost one quarter of the country’s gross domestic product.

An estimated 21 million Pakistanis have been affected by the floods, which inundated 20 percent of the country, devastating hundreds of towns, villages and farmland. General Nadeem Ahmed, chairman of Pakistan’s National Disaster Management Authority, told the UN meeting that the country had only 20 percent of the food needed for flood victims and only 18 percent of the necessary emergency shelter. Just 13 percent of water and sanitation needs have been met.

Millions of homeless people have received no aid at all. Pakistan’s National Disaster Management Authority said on Monday that it had rescued 1.4 million people from flood-affected areas. International Organisation for Migration (IOM) spokesman Chris Lom told Agence France-Presse last week that the UN agency had so far provided emergency shelter to around 2.1 million people, “that is only about 17 percent” of those in need. He added that the IOM only had enough funds to help at most half of those made homeless, or around six million people.

According to the latest UN estimates, as many as 12 million people are in need of emergency food, shelter and medicine. While the official death toll stands at over 1,700, this is likely to increase. On Sunday, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimated that 105,000 children were at risk of dying from malnutrition over the next six months. According to a World Health Organisation estimate, 30 to 35 percent of children in Pakistan were already malnourished prior to the floods.

UNICEF emergency nutritionist Erin Boyd told the Associated Press on Sunday that children “very close to the brink of being malnourished” had been “pushed over the edge”. She added: “There’s just not the capacity to treat this level of severe acute malnutrition.” According to Associated Press, the World Food Program has so far fed more than 4 million people since the crisis began, but the WFP itself estimates that 10 million people are in need.

On Tuesday the UN reported that floods in the southern Sindh province have destroyed an estimated 1.1 million homes, affecting 7.3 million people. Just 1.5 million are in emergency shelter. There is only enough food aid for 1.3 million and clean drinking water for 500,000. UN relief coordinator Fawad Hussain told CNN that relief efforts in the south were inadequate “due to lack of funding”. Andy Pendleton from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs stated: “The flood waters are rising, and every day we are seeing 20,000 to 30,000 people newly displaced.” On Wednesday, *Dawn* reported that another 12 villages had been flooded after eight new breaches in Lake Manchhar.

Disease is likely to claim more lives. The Sindh Health Department confirmed Monday that out of 1,584,450 patients in 516 relief camps, 260,663 had diarrhoea and 47,042 were suffering from gastroenteritis. There were also 261,127 cases of acute respiratory infections and 187,423 of malaria.

The expressions of sympathy at Sunday’s UN meeting were completely cynical. The destructive impact of the floods is the result of extreme poverty and the absence of the basic infrastructure, which are the product of more than a century of imperialist oppression. In recent decades, Pakistan, like other backward countries, has been exploited by global capital as a source of cheap labour. As a result, the major corporations, and the governments that represent them, have a vested interest in maintaining widespread poverty. While shedding crocodile tears over the fate of the disaster victims, international leaders accompanied their tiny pledges of aid with demands that the Pakistani government carry out sweeping austerity measures and increased taxes on working people.

World Bank president Robert Zoellick bluntly stated: “We need

Pakistanis to pay for Pakistan if we are to mobilise the world to pay for Pakistan.” He urged the Pakistani government to “transform tragedy into opportunity” by carrying out pro-business reforms, indicating that the World Bank would seek to use the floods to further the interests of domestic and foreign businesses by “connect[ing] reconstruction to [the] private sector in Pakistan”. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told the meeting that she was “encouraged by the efforts that Pakistan itself is making to institute the economic and tax reforms that will pave the way towards self-sufficiency.”

The same point was reiterated by Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd, and by UK International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell, who declared that international aid “must be matched by the Government of Pakistan implementing ... macro-economic reforms”. Earlier this month, Mitchell told Britain’s parliament that the floods offered “an unprecedented opportunity for the Government of Pakistan to drive forward a radical economic reform agenda”.

Some of the most callous remarks came from US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke. On Monday, Holbrooke told reporters that “the international community is not going to be able to pick up the full costs of the reconstruction phase, the tens of billions of dollars. The international community has been quite generous already ... and no one more generous than the United States.” Asked whether Pakistan would have enough money to rebuild, Holbrooke casually replied that “nobody knows”. He declared that “at a time of scarcity in other countries, a reconstruction effort cannot be financed completely by other countries.”

So far, the US government has pledged a mere \$345 million toward relief efforts in Pakistan, while Britain and Australia have pledged \$210 million and \$75 million. These countries are collectively spending hundreds of billions of dollars annually on the neo-colonial occupation of neighbouring Afghanistan. While global poverty and unemployment have increased dramatically in the past two years, Britain, the US and other major capitalist powers have handed over trillions of dollars to bail out their failed banks and corporations.

The Pakistani government is already imposing the cost of the disaster on working people. In exchange for a \$451 million loan from the International Monetary Fund received last week, it has promised to “introduce a temporary 10 percent income tax surcharge”. The government will reform its existing general sales tax to create a new value-added tax designed to shift the burden from business to working people. It also plans to disband the state-owned Pakistan Electric Power Company (PEPCO), by the end of October. According to the *Dawn*, power prices in flood-devastated Khyber Pakhtunkwa province are expected to soar by 45 percent as a result.

Pakistan’s economic crisis is worsening. The agriculture sector, which accounts for 43 percent of Pakistan’s jobs, has been

devastated, with approximately 160,000 square kilometres of farmland flooded. As well as the lost crops, more than a million cattle and six million poultry have been destroyed. A survey of 39 districts found that the irrigation system had been damaged at almost 19,500 points. The cost of food has risen dramatically. A survey by the *Daily Times* published on Monday found that “prices of chicken, mutton, vegetables, fruits, pulses, wheat flour, cooking oil and other items ... increased by 50 to 100 percent after the holy month of Ramazan.” Inflation is expected to climb to 13.5 percent this year and 20 percent in 2011—up from a previous projection of 9.5 percent. Economic growth is expected to slow from 4.5 to 2.5 percent.

In this environment, the main concern of the US and other powers is to contain escalating social tensions and to prop up the increasingly unstable government of President Asif Ali Zardari, which has assisted the US war in Afghanistan. The Pakistani military has mounted operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies on the border with Afghanistan, which are considered safe havens for Afghan insurgents.

On Sunday, former Pakistani commerce minister Hafiz Pasha, now an analyst at the Institute of Public Policy in Lahore, told the *Los Angeles Times*: “We’ve already had two or three years of high inflation and loss of growth, and there’s already discontent within the population.” Articulating concerns in ruling circles in Islamabad, he said there were “genuine fears” of “public protests and a degree of anarchy”.

On Monday, Muhammad Akram, an unemployed father of four made homeless by the floods, doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire outside Prime Minister Gilani’s residence in Multan. The *Dawn* reported that Akram’s family had been living in the open without a tent since their house was destroyed last month. According to relatives, Akram lost his job as a factory watchman last May and wanted to see Gilani to get a job recommendation. He committed suicide after being pushed away from the prime minister’s residence by police.

See WSWWS Full Coverage of the Pakistan floods



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