

Pakistan: Political infighting escalates in floods' wake

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Close to seven weeks after catastrophic floods first hit Pakistan, the government has done next to nothing to provide relief to the millions of flood-affected Pakistanis. Instead, the various political parties and levels of government have descended into bickering and infighting, as the politicians seek to shift blame for the disaster and pitiful official relief effort onto their rivals.

Nearly 2,000 people have been killed by the floods, according to official estimates. However, the actual death toll is probably much higher. The UN has repeatedly described the disaster as the largest humanitarian crisis in its 65 year-history: some 21 million people have been affected by the floods; at least 10 million people have been displaced; and 8 million are in need of immediate assistance.

Nearly 4 million acres (1.61 million hectares) of crops have been lost in a country where the majority of the population is dependent on farming for its livelihood. Most flood-affected people still lack access to clean water and food aid. There is an epidemic of gastroenteritis and other diseases. According to Oxfam, cases of acute diarrhoea, skin infections, and suspected malaria have tripled in the past two weeks.

Amid mounting tensions between the center and provinces over the distribution of relief funds, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani chaired a meeting September 6 of the Council of Common Interest (CCI)—an inter-governmental body established for the purpose of resolving issues between the federal government and the provinces and regulating inter-provincial relations.

Politicians from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) had earlier accused the Pakistan People's Party-led central government of monopolising relief funds, claiming that this represents an attack on the Punjab. The PML-N, the governing party in Pakistan's most populous province, is playing the ethnic card as it has repeatedly done in the past.

PML-N supremo and former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had initially called for the establishment of a national flood relief committee under the control of "non-governmental personalities". This was opposed by the three other provincial governments, which are aligned with the national PPP-led coalition. They insisted that relief work be under the control of the federal government. The PML-N has nonetheless continued to insist that the provincial governments play a key role in relief operations.

At the CCI meeting, Prime Minister Gilani promised that there would be no discrimination in the distribution of relief funds. "Every penny received and each item collected would be distributed to the provinces by the federal government in a transparent, just, and equitable manner," he claimed.

Gilani announced that each flood-affected family will initially receive 20,000 rupees with the federal and provincial governments sharing the burden of funding the compensation. Twenty-thousand rupees, which is less than \$US240, is a pittance under conditions where many flood-affected families have lost their homes, all or most of their possessions, and their livelihoods.

Leaders from the different provinces have also been accusing each other of inflating damage estimates in order to lay claim to more relief money.

While the assembled politicians did their best to conceal the obvious discord between them, the disunity became clear during the course of the meeting.

Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, brother of PML-N boss Nawaz Sharif, complained once again that his province is not receiving its proper share of relief resources. The day before the CCI meeting, Sharif had accused the federal government of sitting on relief funds. "The provincial government has not yet received any financial assistance from the federal government," he said. "We are facing severe difficulties in tackling the challenge of flood-affected people of the province."

Rival parties have accused the PML-N of using the federal government's incompetence and indifference as an alibi for its own failure to come to the aid of flood-survivors. Senior leaders of the PML-Q, a party created to support the dictatorship of Pervez Musharraf, have charged Sharif with practicing "flood politics," including denying aid to people from areas where they do not have political support.

There have also been many reports, from across the country, that politicians and landlords used their influence to cajole irrigation officials into breaching dykes in such a way as to save their own lands from the floods.

The Muzaffargarh District in south Punjab would largely have escaped flooding if influential politicians, acting in their own interests, had not violated flood management guidelines contends a report published in the September 10 issue of the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Rather than channelling the surging Indus waters into a previously designated flood area on the right river-bank and thereby protecting heavily-populated Muzaffargarh, irrigation officials breached dyes on the left. This resulted in massive flooding in Muzaffargarh that led to the deaths of more than 50 people, displaced more than 1.5 million, and destroyed more than 300 schools.

Reportedly the reason officials chose not to divert the water into the designated flood basin was that it contained fields of cotton and sugar

cane illegally sown by two powerful feudal families with close connections to Punjab's PML (N) provincial government.

According to the *Christian Science Monitor* report, many officials term the Muzaffargarh flood "man-made." However, for fear of reprisals only a few would be quoted by name. "Most of the flood damage would simply not have occurred," said a senior town official, "if the right side of the dam had been breached (in) time."

Jaamshaid Dasti, a Pakistan People's Party Member of the National Assembly from Muzaffargarh charges that the PML (N) aligned landlords "put pressure on the Irrigation Secretary and the District Coordination Officer" not to open the barrage to the flood basin so as to spare their crops.

A dispute has also broken out between officials representing Balochistan and Sindh, with Balochi officials blaming Sindh authorities for intentionally breaching dykes to save parts of Sindh at the expense of Balochistan. According to Abdul Qadir Baloch, the former Governor of Balochistan who joined the PML-N last year, "Balochistan was intentionally flooded by the Sindh and federal governments by breaching dykes."

It has also been revealed that Pakistani authorities diverted flood waters towards Balochistan in order to save Shahbaz Airbase in the district of Jacobabad in Sindh. The airbase has been under the effective control of the US Air Force ever since the US launched its invasion of Afghanistan in the fall of 2001.

Previously reports the US Air Force had refused to allow relief agencies to use the base for aid distribution, although it was the only airport in the region and under conditions where roads were impassable, caused widespread resentment across the country.

The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has rushed to deny the allegations, claiming that the airbase is under its control and that no flood water was diverted in order to prevent the airbase from being inundated. However, Pakistani authorities have failed to explain why nearly all of Jacobabad district and the neighbouring Jafferabad district in Balochistan were drowned by the floods, while the airbase was not affected.

According to the Asian Human Rights Commission, over 800,000 people were displaced as a result of the decision to divert flood waters away from the airbase.

In a statement the Hong Kong-based Commission observed that the presence of Pakistani military personnel at the point where the water was diverted away from the airbase underscores that the breach was ordered from above: "Those giving the orders must be prosecuted. The government of Pakistan must also probe the allegations of deliberate breaches, not only in the incident involving the Shahbaz airbase but also those reported earlier where the agricultural lands belonging to senior ministers [were] protected from the floodwaters ... by intentional breaches."

There is a growing recognition within the Pakistani media that the floods and the manifest inability and unwillingness of the authorities to mobilize a serious relief effort are stoking an already profound popular alienation from, and anger with, all sections of the political establishment. There are spontaneous protests over the lack of relief on a daily basis.

As the flood waters surged last month, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement

(MQM), which is a coalition partner in both the PPP-led national and Sind governments, called on the military to assume emergency powers.

When the MQM came under attack from virtually the entire political establishment and much of the media for its call for the military to retake center stage, MQM head Altaf Hussain demanded "radical measures" to end landlord domination. This was a clear swipe at the PML (N) and PPP, many of whose leaders come from prominent landowning families, and an attempt to appeal to popular anger over the brazen manner in which many landowners had saved their own estates at the expense of poor villagers.

"A revolution similar to the French Revolution is knocking on the door of Pakistan and the MQM will lead that change," claimed Hussain. "All airports will be closed and these corrupt elements will be hanged publicly, so that no one would attempt corruption in the country again."

Hussain has called on the people of Balochistan, Pakistan's poorest province, to support him, pointing to the neglect and repression that Balochis have faced at the hands of the central government. Hussain's appeal stinks of hypocrisy and demagoguery. A party that purports to uphold the interests of the *mohajirs* (people who migrated to Sind from north India following the 1947 Partition), the MQM came to prominence in the 1980s as an ally of the Zia military dictatorship in suppressing opposition in Sind. It is infamous for its whipping up of anti-Sindhi and anti-Pashtun sentiments in Karachi where the party is based. The MQM has used political and communal violence in order to maintain its grip on political power and control over various mafia-style rackets in the country's largest city.

While a military coup is certainly possible, especially if social unrest spreads, the past two-plus years of civilian government have demonstrated that the difference between civilian and military rule is largely one of appearances. Not a single military officer or government bureaucrat has been punished for his role in sustaining the dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf.

Political and economic power remains largely in the hands of the US-backed military which is committed to maintaining the grossly unequal socio-economic order in the country. The counterinsurgency campaign in the northwest region of the country has intensified under the PPP government, with deadly drone strikes in the country tripling since President Obama took office. And under President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Gilani the PPP-led government has continued the neo-liberal policies of the previous military regime, signing onto a new IMF austerity program.

At Washington's urging, the PPP government announced in July that General Kiyani's term as the Chief of Pakistan's Armed Services has been extended for a further three years. Kiyani, who long served as Musharraf's second in command in the armed forces, was treated by the Obama administration as its principal interlocutor when a US-Pakistani cabinet level strategic dialogue was held in Washington last spring.

In the wake of the floods, the military has been able to increase its influence and power, with much of the bourgeois press heaping praise on the military's rescue effort while deriding the civilian government.

On September 7, Interior Minister Rehman Malik announced that the government is planning to launch a "Swat-style" counter-insurgency campaign in Balochistan directed against Islamist militias. The next day he banned five Balochistan nationalist organizations. Targeted operations will now be launched against these organizations, which emerged largely

in response to decades of neglect and abuse at the hands of the federal government.

Throughout the country's history, Pakistani politicians have engaged in reactionary religious, nationalist, and ethno-linguistic appeals in order to advance their factional struggles for pelf and privilege and, more importantly, so as to divert popular anger at chronic poverty and massive social inequality into reactionary channels. This has led to widespread ethnic and sectarian violence, as well as attacks against religious minorities.

Under conditions where all the institutions of the Pakistani state and all of the political parties of the bourgeoisie are profoundly discredited, there is every reason to anticipate that the Pakistani ruling elite will again seek to divide working people along national-ethnic and communal lines.

Indeed such a development is already presaged by the infighting and finger-pointing over the flood relief.

See Full Coverage of the Pakistan Floods



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