

Pakistan's summer floods: A man-made disaster

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More than six months after catastrophic floods first hit Pakistan, the misery produced by the disaster continues to take its toll on millions of flood-affected families and the toiling population as a whole. This tragedy is a stunning indictment of the Pakistani bourgeoisie and its international allies, above all Washington.

The unprecedented floods killed nearly 2,000 people. But it is widely believed that many hundreds, if not thousands, of survivors subsequently died due to disease and malnutrition.

And millions of flood survivors are now at risk of contracting pneumonia and other respiratory diseases due to immune systems weakened by lack of food, stress, and cold weather. A recent report in the *Globe and Mail* said 7 million people remain without any access to shelter, forcing them to contend with homelessness during the harsh winter months. According to the UN, 800,000 families are still in desperate need of emergency aid, especially food and basic shelter. The number of people needing food aid is expected to increase by 500,000 in 2011 due to the destruction of crops by the floods and the continuing submersion of large tracts of agricultural land. These estimates are likely low since many of the flood-affected are living in miserable conditions in “unregistered” camps—informal settlements that the Pakistani government refuses to recognize as refuges for displaced flood victims.

The country sustained approximately \$3 billion worth of damage to its agricultural sector, resulting in massive losses of income and jobs among small farmers and agricultural laborers and sharp food price increases. Pakistan's already inadequately developed social infrastructure was also severely affected by the floods. Some 5,000 schools were destroyed and over \$1 billion worth of damage was done to public buildings. Nearly 2,500 miles of highway and approximately 3,500 miles of railway were damaged or destroyed. The overall damage estimate is approximately \$10 billion.

While the floods were a natural event, the chaotic displacement of millions of people and the massive toll of destruction were a socially produced disaster.

Monsoons occur every year in Pakistan and floods are common; however, successive governments have failed to develop the necessary flood-control measures and warning systems that would minimize the impact of any potential event. The infrastructure in Pakistan is not designed to cope with large-scale natural disasters, such as the 2005 Kashmir earthquake that killed tens of thousands of people. As can be expected, the working class and rural toilers are the main victims of this government neglect and lack of

planning.

In response to severe floods in the 1970s, Pakistan established the Federal Flood Commission (FFC) in 1977. The purpose of the FFC was to execute flood control projects and safeguard the lives and property of the population from the effects of potential floods. The FFC claimed to have finished about \$900 million in flood-management construction by 2010. However, very little of the work was actually completed. There was no central plan in place and dyke construction was often carried out privately by wealthy landowners rather than the state. Many ordinary Pakistanis residing in flood prone areas were forced to pay bribes in order to get flood control or irrigation projects. As a result, Pakistan was left grossly unprepared for the worst floods in the country's history.

As the disaster unfolded, it was obvious that there was no systematic management of efforts to mitigate the floods. While some local officials reinforced their dykes, many allowed theirs to fail and decisions as to which barrages would be opened were manipulated by the rich and powerful to protect their interests.

Government negligence and lack of planning had particularly disastrous consequences in the province of Sind, thereby demonstrating the incompetence and indifference of the Pakistani elite. The authorities in Sind had nearly two months to prepare as the rising water surged southward down the Indus Valley toward the sea. Yet there was no coordinated effort to protect levees or evacuate the people threatened by the floods.

According to one official, “local government figures in the Sind Province conspired with prominent landowners to bolster the riverbank running through their property and others deemed important at the expense of other regions, which were left vulnerable to flood waters.” And according to the Pakistani newspaper *Express Tribune*, Khursheed Shah, a senior Pakistan Peoples' Party leader and the federal minister of labor and manpower, prevented the construction of breaches to channel the surging water away from the more populous areas of Sind. Shah's actions were intended to make sure that the poorest people in the province bore the brunt of the crisis and that the interests of his cronies would be protected.

The Muzaffargarh District in south Punjab could also have largely avoided the flooding if venal politicians had not violated flood-mitigation guidelines in their own interests, according to a report in the *Christian Science Monitor* last September.

Irrigation authorities could have saved heavily-populated

Muzaffargarh by diverting the surging flood water into a previously designated flood area on the right riverbank. However, the dykes were deliberately breached on the left. As a result, over 50 people were killed and 1.5 million were displaced. Hundreds of schools were also destroyed due to the decision. It was reported that two powerful feudal families with close ties to the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in Punjab used their influence to pressure officials to not channel the water into the designated flood basin.

According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, several officials described the Muzaffargarh flood as “man-made.” A Pakistan People’s Party member of the National Assembly, Jamshed Dasti, charged that the PML-N-aligned landlords had “put pressure on the Irrigation Security and the District Coordination Officer” not to open the barrage to the designated flood area in order to spare their crops.

Popular anger at government incompetence, as well as reports from around the country that politicians and landlords pressured irrigation authorities into breaching dykes in a manner that would save their own lands, have forced the Supreme Court to launch an investigation in an obvious damage control operation.

The Supreme Court had asked all provincial governments to submit reports about the unauthorized diversion of flood water. These reports are likely to be a new source of acrimony within Pakistan’s elite, since politicians from all the provinces and establishment political parties responded to the floods by seeking to shift blame for the disaster and pitiful relief effort onto their rivals and by whipping up national-ethnic rivalries.

On December 14, the Supreme Court set up a four-member commission with a representative from each province to go over the reports submitted by the provinces. The commission is expected to release its own report in mid-January. The report will most likely be focused on the breached dykes in Sind that caused extensive damage to Baluchistan Province.

It is practically a given that the inquiry will result in a massive cover-up and that no politicians or powerful landlords will be prosecuted for their reckless and criminal actions.

While popular anger at the PPP-led national coalition government has not abated, the Pakistani media has all but dropped its coverage of the disaster, its causes and consequences. This lack of interest in examining what the UN has termed the largest humanitarian disaster in decades arises from the elite’s callous indifference to the fate of Pakistan’s workers and toilers and its recognition that any serious probing of the flood could end in nothing but an indictment of Pakistan’s capitalist social order.

The media establishment has also been largely silent on the Shahbaz Airbase controversy that so outraged ordinary Pakistanis.

Last August, it was revealed that Pakistani authorities had intentionally diverted flood waters toward Baluchistan in order to save the Shahbaz Airbase in the district of Jacobabad in Sind from being submerged. The airbase has been under the effective control of the US Air Force ever since the US invasion of Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. The Pakistan Air Force and the Pakistani government continue to deny the allegations, but have never explained why the airbase escaped the floods while the majority of Jacobabad District and nearby Jafferabad District in Baluchistan

were inundated with flood water. Over 800,000 people were displaced as a result of the decision to divert the flood water away from the airbase.

The decision to place the Pakistan government’s and military’s support for the US war in Afghanistan before the most basic needs of ordinary Pakistani’s failed to provoke even a whimper of protest among Pakistan’s political and media establishment. The incident was yet another of example of the Pakistani bourgeoisie’s utter subservience to imperialism. Indeed, as Pakistan was drowning in flood water, illegal US drone attacks in the northwest tribal areas continued to kill scores of people.

The US government has donated just enough aid to prevent the collapse of the PPP-led government. The principal concern of the Obama administration has been to ensure that the volatile situation in the country does not spiral out of control and jeopardize US interests in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The miserable poverty in so-called developing countries like Pakistan is the result of colonialism and imperialist domination and oppression and the perfidy of its local agents, the national bourgeoisie. A client state since its inception, Pakistan remains completely dependent on foreign powers, especially Washington.

During the past three decades, the vast disparity between the rich and the poor has increased significantly. While implementing repeated International Monetary Fund (IMF) restructuring programs, Pakistan’s elite has sought to further enrich itself by grabbing privatized state assets and seeking to transform Pakistan into a cheap-labor platform.

The IMF is now demanding that the heavily-indebted country carry out even more brutal cuts to government spending, which can only result in further deterioration of infrastructure and leave Pakistan vulnerable to similar disasters in the future.

Moreover, the artificial borders imposed through the 1947 communal partition of the Indian subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and predominantly Hindu India have made it impossible to establish comprehensive and reliable flood management for the rivers that run through both India and Pakistan. The rivalry over water resources is one of the many potential sources of conflict between the two nuclear-armed countries.

The catastrophe in Pakistan has once again demonstrated that the basic needs of working people cannot be met within the framework of the capitalist system. The social infrastructure and rational planning that is needed to minimize the impact of natural disasters will only be secured as part of the conscious struggle of the Pakistani working class and rural toilers to overthrow the irrational and outdated profit system.



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