

Pakistan: Red Cross warns of Tunisia-style unrest in wake of floods

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Last year's floods and the meager, disorganized government relief effort they occasioned have exacerbated food insecurity in Pakistan to the point that the poverty-stricken country could soon see Tunisia-style unrest, one of the world's premier relief agencies has warned.

The largest natural disaster in Pakistan's history, the Indus Valley floods affected 21 million people. They deprived millions of their homes, swamped hundreds of thousands of hectares of crops, and drowned a significant portion of the country's livestock.

According to International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) President Tadateru Konoe, many agricultural areas are still submerged, although the flooding ended from four to six months ago, depending on whether one is talking about the country's north, where the floods began, or the southern province of Sind, through which the Indus passes before emptying into the Arabian Sea.

Because many fields remain under water and farmers have lost seed, livestock and implements, agricultural production may be significantly impacted, driving up food prices and spreading hunger—and not just in 2010-11.

"If the crops may be lost for successive years," said the IFRC's Konoe, "that may develop into some sort of social unrest and political turmoil. That is what the president was very much worried about," he added in a reference to recent comments by Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari.

"I don't know how long they can stand this type of situation...but it may be utilized by political opponents to criticize the government, so a minor thing may become a big thing like the situation in Tunisia."

Mass protests of Tunisian workers and youth forced the longstanding dictator and ally of French and US imperialism, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, to flee to Saudi Arabia last month.

The upheaval in Tunisia quickly spread to Egypt and across the region.

The root causes of the uprising in Tunisia—poverty and hunger, corruption, repression, and imperialist oppression—plague Pakistan, only on a much greater scale.

The devastating floods ravaged approximately 5.4 million acres of Pakistan's most fertile crop land, resulting in \$3 billion worth of damage. Approximately 200,000 acres of sugar cane and 200,000 acres of rice were destroyed by the floods. Some 500,000 tons of stocked wheat were lost along with 300,000 tons of animal fodder and stored grain.

The widespread destruction of crops and the continuing submersion of much of Pakistan's agricultural lands have led to food shortages and sharp price hikes for basic food staples. These increases come on top of those that are being caused by international price gyrations. Recent months have seen sharp increases in world food, oil, and fertilizer prices.

The State Bank of Pakistan recently raised its inflation estimate for the current fiscal year, from a range of 13.5 to 14.5 percent to between 15 and 16 percent, and chided the Pakistan People's Party-led national coalition government for "excessive budgetary borrowing, particularly from the central bank."

According to the *Express Tribune*, "High government expenses financed

through borrowing from the central bank, a proposed reduction in energy subsidies and rising international prices of commodities have been cited as the reasons behind the higher rate of expected inflation."

In a country in which the majority of the population lives on less than \$2 per day, the slightest increase in food prices can dramatically impact on the lives of workers and toilers. Hunger and malnutrition are widespread in every part of the country. Data collected prior to the floods revealed that 77 million of Pakistan's 175 million people suffered from hunger and 45 million were malnourished.

Child malnutrition has been and continues to be a serious problem throughout the country. In Punjab, Pakistan's largest province, 17 percent of children under the age of five were malnourished even before the floods. In Pakistan's poorest province, Baluchistan, 27 percent of children under five were malnourished, and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (the former North West Frontier Province) the figure was 13 percent. More than a third of Pakistani children were found to be underweight before the floods, and researchers reported that up to 44 percent of rural children were stunted.

A recent report by the UN children's agency, UNICEF, revealed that six months after the floods nearly a quarter of the children in the province of Sind are suffering from acute malnutrition. Sind was the province most adversely impacted by the floods. Although authorities had weeks' advance warning that flood waters were surging down the Indus from the north, they failed to mount a coordinated effort to protect levees and evacuate people threatened by the surging waters.

The UNESCO report showed that 23.1 percent of children in Sind and 21.2 percent of children in the south of the province are acutely malnourished. This includes approximately 90,000 children aged 6-59 months.

These rates are well above the 15 percent emergency threshold established by the World Health Organization (WHO) and are comparable to some of the most impoverished parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The rate of "severe acute malnutrition" in Sind is also well above the WHO threshold. Northern Sind had a 6.1 percent "severe acute malnutrition" rate and in Southern Sind the rate was found to be 2.9 percent.

"We are looking at hundreds of thousands of children at risk," Kristen Elsby, a UNICEF spokeswoman, told Reuters.

Many parts of Sind remain under floodwater. According to the World Food Program, at least 600,000 people in Sind and Baluchistan are still living in temporary relief camps.

In Ramli Khosa, a small village in Sind, about 1,500 flood-survivors are residing in tents donated by foreign aid groups. The people living in the camp are forced to travel a kilometer in rough conditions in order to fetch water.

Interviews conducted in several villages across the province revealed that only a fraction of people had received compensation from the government. The small number of families who were compensated received the paltry sum of 20,000 Pakistani rupees (about US \$235). This

is grossly inadequate in a situation where millions of people have lost all of their belongings and in many cases, their livelihoods.

In many villages farmers are worried that it may be years before they can plant again. In order to survive, these farmers are toiling as day laborers for about \$1 per day.

“We are hardly getting any help,” said Alimi Khoso, an elderly woman residing in a camp. “Where will we go if there are more floods? We don’t even have enough money to run away.”

Looking over his flattened house, another flood survivor asked, “How can I plan to rebuild it without any help from the government?”

In Murad Chandio, another village in Sind, flood survivors are living amidst the wreckage, with nothing to protect them from the winter cold except for the blankets hanging above them. These survivors are terrified at the prospect of more floods later this year.

“People’s resilience has been really affected,” said Penny Sims of the Red Cross. “Even any low level flooding in the future is going to be a problem. They may not be able to cope.”

The situation confronting the flood-affected in Baluchistan is just as bleak. According to the UN’s refugee agency, 166,000 people in the province are still displaced and are living in 240 official camps as well as many makeshift camps that the Pakistani government refuses to recognize as refuges for the flood-affected. Many of the survivors are in desperate need of food and basic shelter.

The worst affected district in Baluchistan is Jafferabad, where 16,000 houses and 851 villages were destroyed. Jafferabad was inundated with floodwaters due in large part to the intentional diversion of floodwaters by Pakistani authorities toward Baluchistan in an effort to prevent flooding of the Shahbaz Airbase in the Jacobabad district of Sind. The airbase is under the effective control of the US Air Force and has been so since the US invasion of Afghanistan in the fall of 2001.

The woefully inadequate response to the flood disaster is a devastating indictment of the Pakistani ruling elite and its allies abroad. Flood survivors, frustrated by the government’s callous indifference to their plight, held numerous spontaneous protests last year.

The public’s anger was intensified by reports from around the country that politicians from various political parties and wealthy landowners intentionally breached dykes to ensure that their own lands and interests would be protected.

Many of the flood-affected have had to pay bribes to receive aid.

Politicians from all the establishment political parties have responded to the public outrage over the floods and miserable official relief effort by shifting blame onto their rivals and actively promoting ethnic and communal divisions.

A recent study by the American Geophysical Union revealed that had Pakistan made an effort to coordinate with European weather monitors at the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasting, it could have had advanced warning of the heavy rainfalls that triggered the floods and organized a timely evacuation of millions of people.

According to Peter Webster, professor of earth and atmospheric science at the Georgia Institute of Technology, “This disaster could have been minimized and even the flooding could have been minimized. If we were working with Pakistan, they would have known eight to 10 days in advance that the floods were coming.”

But as one of Pakistan’s leading newspapers the *Dawn* was forced to concede, even when authorities had ample advance warning of the disaster they proved unwilling and unable to take effective action, abandoning the people to the floodwaters.

“The assumption,” wrote the *Dawn* in a February 3 editorial, is that if Pakistani authorities had been forewarned of the impending floods, they “would have put in place measures to mitigate damage, such as warning the public, evacuating the areas at risk, putting crisis response and management teams on the standby and shoring up emergency facilities.

[But] would this have been done? When large parts of northern Pakistan started to flood, we knew that the water would travel downstream. Similarly, warnings for heavy rainfall in the south were received in advance. And yet, Sind and Baluchistan were the worst affected. Few, if any, mitigation measures were put in place ...”

No one in the Pakistani government has been held to account for this, nor for the pathetic relief effort that followed—just as no one in the military and state bureaucracy, let alone their business cronies, has paid any penalty for their role in sustaining General Pervez Musharraf, the most recent in a long line of US-backed dictators, in power for almost a decade ending in 2008.

The Red Cross warning of Tunisia-style unrest is an attempt to alarm the US, Britain, France and other great powers so as to spur them into providing additional aid money to Pakistan.

To date, the US and its allies have provided Pakistan scant help, even as they use the country as their principal staging ground for the occupation of Afghanistan.

In fact the imperialist powers have exploited the flood crisis to intensify their pressure on Pakistan to implement an International Monetary Fund (IMF) restructuring program that will only intensify the suffering of the masses. With the support of the Obama administration, Britain’s Liberal-Conservative coalition, and the rest of the so-called international community, the IMF has held up the release of the last tranche in a loan contracted in 2008 until Islamabad drastically curtails social spending, imposes a new value-added tax, eliminates all subsidies on gasoline, natural gas, and electricity, and effectively surrenders it power to force the state bank to loan it money to meet state budget deficits.

The Pakistani bourgeoisie is well-aware that it is sitting on a tinderbox. In all the major newspapers one can find warnings similar to the one issued by the Red Cross. Various politicians have also warned of a coming social explosion.

This threat only causes the Pakistan’s ruling class to clutch even more tenaciously to the military and to the US as the guarantors of its property and privileges. While none of the political parties want to be seen as responsible for implementing the IMF’s demands for fear of the incurring popular wrath, all are agreed such “pro-market” measures must be taken.

Last year Pakistan experienced numerous protests in response to food price increases and power cuts, as well as strikes. In cities across the country, the working class is being propelled into struggle.

What is needed is a new revolutionary party of the working class to guide this struggle. Such a party must fight to unify Pakistan’s toilers with their counterparts across the region in the fight for the United Socialist States of South Asia. The urgent task at hand is the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Pakistan.



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