

Public anger mounts as floods again engulf Pakistan

Ali Ismail
21 September 2011

Popular anger is spreading throughout Pakistan over the PPP-led government's pitiful response to the massive floods that are ravaging the country for the second year in succession.

Flash floods unleashed by heavy monsoon rains have killed at least 342 people since late last month, the majority of them in the province of Sindh. The floods have now affected over 7 million people and destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes across Sindh and Balochistan. Millions of Pakistanis are already suffering from flood-related diseases like cholera and gastroenteritis, and countless more are at risk of contracting such illnesses.

With rains continuing, the geographic reach of the floods is rapidly expanding and now includes parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (the former North-West Frontier Province).

The unfolding disaster is rooted in the gross incompetence and negligence of Pakistan's venal bourgeoisie. Although the country experienced the worst flooding in its history during the summer of 2010, Pakistani authorities failed to prioritize the repair and amelioration of the Indus Valley flood-control network or to invest in early-warning systems that would allow timely evacuations in the event of heavy rains. Over 21 million people were affected by last year's floods and approximately 2,000 people lost their lives.

Like last year, the response of the central government, a coalition led by the Pakistan People's Party, or PPP, has been woefully inadequate, infuriating millions of flood-affected people and sparking numerous demonstrations.

With anger mounting, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani announced last week that he was canceling a trip to this week's UN General Assembly in New York, to assume personal leadership of the relief effort. However, there have been suggestions in the press that Gilani's decision may in fact have been prompted by the continuing crisis in US-Pakistani relations, with Washington demanding that Pakistan do still more to support the US occupation of Afghanistan. US President Obama reportedly refused Gilani's request for a meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has made an urgent appeal for money and food to support the flood relief effort, but foreign governments and international donor agencies have been slow to respond.

According to Firdous Ashiq Awan, Pakistan's Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting, the floods have killed almost 350 people and injured over 630. Most of the deaths are due to falling roofs, drowning and water-borne diseases. "More than 7.1 million people have been directly affected out of which 491,000 people have been accommodated in 2618 relief camps," Awan stated on Sunday.

At 271 percent above normal, the monsoon rains in Sindh this year

are the highest ever recorded. All of Sindh's 23 districts have been affected by the floods, according to the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA).

Sindh irrigation authorities have accused powerful landlords of making illegal breaches in drains and canals across the province so as to protect their lands and crops. The landlords have responded by claiming that the breaches are the result of irrigation officials failing to de-silt various canals.

Aid agencies are warning of a humanitarian disaster as thousands of refugees flee to Karachi, Hyderabad, and other cities less affected by the floods.

"Our opinion is that it's already worse than last year, not because of the numbers but the impact on a population already severely affected by last year's mega-flood," said Oxfam's country director for Pakistan, Neva Khan. "We're talking about the same population." 800,000 families affected by the 2010 floods remain without permanent shelter and 1.4 million people still require food assistance.

The floods have damaged approximately 1.3 million houses, with 540,000 homes completely destroyed. The majority of the flood-affected are living in squalid conditions in the open air. Thousands of people remain stranded on hills and roofs surrounded by contaminated water. Two million people are already suffering from flood-related diseases, and 7,000 people are being treated for snake bites. Millions of flood-affected people are at risk of water-borne diseases such as cholera and diarrhea, including one million children. On Monday, two women died of malaria in Badin District, according to Geo News. There are growing fears that an outbreak of dengue fever may spread from Punjab to flood-ravaged Sindh. 6,000 people are being treated for the dengue virus, which has already killed 40 people, most of them in Lahore.

Children in Sindh are threatened by both malaria and new floodwaters contaminated by sewage from several large towns, reports Save the Children. "Children living in Sindh were already very weak and vulnerable following last year's floods, and rates of malnutrition are high," said Faris Kasim, spokesperson for Save the Children in Pakistan. "Now thousands of children are again having to survive in the cold, at risk of disease and facing an even tougher struggle to get the food they need. It's crucial we provide life-saving supplies to the affected population as fast as possible to make sure children have shelter and are protected from life-threatening disease."

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), there are at least 115,000 pregnant women among the flood-affected. Nearly 400 of them go into labor each day, with many having life-threatening complications requiring urgent medical assistance. Many pregnant women from districts with high levels of malnourishment are severely

anemic, placing them at even greater risk of complications arising from pregnancy and delivery.

The floods are expected to exacerbate the already high levels of malnourishment in the country. Food insecurity plagues 57 percent of Pakistani households, according to the results of this year's National Nutrition Survey, which were released on Saturday.

As much as six million acres of land has been submerged by floodwater and 80,000 livestock swept away, threatening the livelihoods of countless toilers across Sindh and Balochistan. In Sindh, much of the rural population has no access to markets, and food prices have skyrocketed in flood-affected districts. There are fears that some areas may be submerged for up to six months.

During a visit to the badly-hit towns of Nawabshah and Sanghar, Prime Minister Gilani claimed that flood victims could live in government-run relief camps for as long as they wanted and that they would be provided with food and shelter. Far fewer relief camps have been set up this year, however, and there is no space in the camps for the majority of the flood-affected. Many thousands of families are living on roads across Sindh after being turned away from relief camps. Flood victims have been using bamboo, shawls and sheets to erect makeshift huts, but remain in desperate need of food and clean water.

"We did not know where to go when the rains swept in, took away our goats and destroyed the vegetable crop we had cultivated," Azrah Bibi told IRIN. Bibi and her extended family have been living alongside a road near the town of Badin in Sindh. "We saw some people here and joined them. Some people delivered one lot of food, but there has been very little since, and it is hard to cook anyway since we have no facilities other than a fire from bits of timber and scrap," she said.

On Sunday, the BBC reported that one of its correspondents in Sindh had his path blocked by a group of desperate women. The anguished mothers said they hadn't received any assistance and that their children were dying.

In Sindh's Badin District, low caste Hindus (Dalits/ex-untouchables) seeking shelter in relief camps have been met with discrimination. Hindus account for about 20 percent of the 1.8 million people residing in the district. "We tried to find refuge in the Technical College on Seerani Road, but were turned out by the management," a local Dalit told the *Dawn* on Saturday. "Our children have had nothing to eat since yesterday. We've resorted to begging," said another.

In Balochistan, five districts have been affected by the floods. Surging waters have destroyed thousands of homes in Balochistan, most of them in Dera Allahyar and Rojhan Jamali. Last week, Senators Ismail Buledi and Ghulam Nabi Bangash—the former with the religious fundamentalist JIU-F and from Balochistan, and the latter from the Pashtun-nationalist Awami National Party—accused the government of adopting a "discriminatory policy" in response to the floods. "No single camp has been set up for flood victims [in Balochistan] ... this is injustice to the people of Balochistan," said Buledi.

According to Prime Minister Gilani, flood-affected families are to receive the grossly inadequate sum of 20,000 Pakistani rupees (\$228) in the form of Watan Cards, a pittance considering that many families have lost all of their possessions, including their homes. The Watan Card scheme was initially launched in response to last year's floods. A computerized national identity card (CNIC) is required to apply for a Watan Card, excluding large numbers of flood victims who do not

have CNICs, including families headed by widows and minors.

The government claims it can only raise 30 percent of the funds needed for emergency rescue and relief efforts. The UN has requested \$357 million from the so-called "international community" to aid Pakistani flood victims, but the United States and other powers have thus far refused to make substantial funding available. The US is sending food aid for 350,000 people and medical assistance for about 500,000 people. The European Commission has offered just \$13.7 million in aid for flood-affected Pakistanis. According to the *Express Tribune*, international donors are insisting that no aid money will be distributed until they receive a clear blueprint for third party audits showing how the money will be spent. "They [donors] want a transparent mechanism in which all damages and losses should be evaluated by a reputable third party," Punjab Governor Abdul Latif Khosa told reporters on Sunday.

Meanwhile, the government's pitiful response to the floods continues to infuriate people across the country, sparking protests in several cities and towns. Workers and toilers across Sindh and Balochistan have accused the authorities of failing to repair dams and embankments damaged by last year's floods. In Badin, flood victims have rallied against the lack of relief aid, Geo News reported on Monday. Protestors blocked the Karachi-Badin highway and chanted slogans against the government. On Saturday, flood-affected women in the city of Hyderabad demonstrated against the local government and its failure to provide food assistance and adequate shelter.

15-year-old Ghulam Hussain was shot dead by a private guard in Jhol town on Saturday when hundreds of starving protestors raided a factory to gain access to relief goods. Local residents were incensed by the shooting and staged a sit-in, vowing to continue their demonstration until arrests were made for the slaying of the youth. Jhol police eventually registered a First Information Report against Rana Abdul Sattar, the owner of the factory and a Member of the Pakistan Assembly, as well as two of his guards.

The plight of ordinary Pakistanis will undoubtedly worsen in the coming days and weeks, with monsoon rains likely to continue, according to weather forecasters, until mid-October.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact