Devastating floods threaten famine, disease in Pakistan

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Left with little or no assistance, millions of people in flood-ravaged Pakistan face the imminent threat of famine and disease outbreaks. At least 456 have died and over 9 million have already been affected by the floods since heavy rains began in mid-August. Southern Pakistan, where there was hardly any recovery from the unprecedented damage left by last summer's floods, is the hardest hit.

The death toll of 433 this summer in the southern province of Sindh alone speaks volumes for the Pakistani authorities' negligence and indifference to last year's disaster.

More than two thousands died last year, while 20 million were affected by the floods that inundated almost 20 percent of Pakistan. Hundreds of thousands still live in camps a year later, depending on aid to survive. Many others have been deprived of their livelihood and plunged into poverty. One of every four people in Sindh lives in absolute poverty, earning less than $1.25 a day.

Despite last year's calamity, the Pakistani government has not tried to build an adequate flood-control system.

According to the United Nations, 2.75 million people are in "immediate need of food assistance." Some 1.5 million houses have been damaged, of which at least 580,000 have been completely destroyed. About three-quarters of agricultural crops and two-third of stocks have been destroyed or damaged in the worst-affected southern districts of Sindh. At least 78,000 head of livestock have been killed and another 5 million are at risk. The cost of agricultural damage is estimated at 163 billion rupees ($1.87 billion), according to official figures.

Luigi Damiani, a senior official of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), noted: "Around 80 per cent of people in the affected area depend on agriculture—including livestock—for a living. These animals often represent a family's entire life savings," he said.

The FAO statement claimed the damage is "worse than last year's devastating flooding" and warned of "spiralling humanitarian consequences unless immediate assistance is provided." It noted: "The destruction of crops has wiped out farmers' present and future sources of food and income. … For many communities in southern Pakistan, the new disaster compounds losses from last year's floods, which receded too late in many areas of Sindh to allow for winter planting."

Food losses have contributed to rising prices. Inflation is expected to increase by two to three percentage points from the current 13 percent by the end of the year, making it even harder to get by on low wages.

The spiralling impact of destroyed crops, deepening debt, and worsening health conditions will be devastating for the Pakistani masses. A pre-flood report by international charity Oxfam found that 36 percent of Pakistanis are under-nourished. In this situation, aid agencies warned, failure to assist quickly would result in "a second emergency of rising malnutrition and rising water-borne diseases risks, making a public health disaster a reality."

According to the National Disaster Management Authority, over 2 million were sick as of the beginning of the week. Malaria, diarrhoea, skin diseases and snake bites are serious problems. Millions of people are in desperate need of drinking water, including at least 1.36 million of children and 240,000 pregnant women.

A broad assessment of the impact remains impossible as infrastructure has been ruined. Many people remain

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without proper shelter or food, even when they can be reached.

Younis Malkani, who was forced to settle in a dune with his wife and their three children after being displaced, described his experience to the *Christian Science Monitor*. "We don't have drinking water and there's not enough food to feed the children," he said. His neighbour Ghulam Rasool, who had to rescue his ill wife by carrying her on his back when his village was flooded, complained: "We were dying of hunger and thirst and there is no medicine."

Amid appalling conditions that have thrown poor Pakistanis into destitution for the second consecutive year, public anger against the government is rising. The incompetence and negligence of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government are responsible for the lack of preparation for this year's high monsoon rains.

Pakistan's Meteorological Department refuted criticism that it did not warn the government in time. Its director Sardar Sarfaraz said: "We had given early warning of heavy spells well in time to all stakeholders if only they had heeded," and asked, "If the met office had provided good weather intelligence well before in time, then why were their warnings not paid any attention to?"

A spokesperson for Oxfam, Mubashir Akram, explained to *Dawn* that the government failed to implement a "disaster risk reduction" plan developed by experts, even though only $30 million were required to implement it.

In an attempt to head off criticism, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani said: "We have mobilised all our national resources to provide immediate relief to the affected people."

This is an outright lie. The government response was almost non-existent during last year's floods. Despite the desperate need to rebuild damaged infrastructure, his government cut development expenditures in half last year in line with the pro-market dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

As the disaster's massive scale became clear, the UN appealed for a $356.7 million relief fund on September 18. Revealing the indifference of world governments to the plight of the Pakistani people, it had received only $11.5 million 10 days after its launch. The Oxfam Country Director Neva Khan, in a statement decrying "sluggish donor response," compared the response so far received to that of the last year's meagre response to UN relief fund. He said, "This is a cruel repeat of last year. Again funding is too little and far too slow."

The statement revealed that "only $1.30 has been committed per person by international donors in the first 10 days of the UN appeal, as opposed to $3.20 committed in the same period during last year's floods."

In 2005, when a deadly earthquake hit Pakistan leaving 3.5 million people homeless, it had received $70 per person during the first 10 days, Oxfam noted.

Akram explained the difficulty of raising funds, telling *AlertNet*: "The on-going situation between Pakistan and the US has cast a shadow over the understanding of the world vis-à-vis Pakistan." Joe Cropp, a communications delegate for the Red Cross, added: "While we are a neutral and impartial organisation, we are not politically naive. We do engage with diplomats, we do engage with governments and we've learnt this from them. As one diplomat said to us last year, 'Pakistan is a bad brand'."

These statements reveal that US and other major powers are leaving millions of Pakistani flood victims to starve in large part to press the Pakistani government to adopt more pro-Western policies, notably towards the NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

US-Pakistan relations hit a new low after the US accused Pakistani intelligence of having links with a militant group that it said was responsible for the recent attack on its compounds in Afghanistan. The US is demanding Pakistan to do more in the proxy war against Taliban and to mobilize its military forces against the Haqqani network, a pro-Taliban militant group operating on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

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