

Neglected Pakistan flood victims left to survive on their own

Sampath Perera
19 October 2011

While the floodwaters that inundated vast swathes of Sindh state in southern Pakistan are beginning to recede after ravaging the province for more than a month, conditions remain extremely dangerous for the people living in the region. Already threatened by famine and disease, the plight of the flood-affected is being exacerbated by the incompetence and neglect of the national and state governments, both led by the Pakistan People's Party.

While the exact figure is unclear, the number of people killed in the floods has likely surpassed 500. The death toll had reached at least 465 by October 4, according to USAID. Nearly 9 million people have been affected, with millions of houses destroyed or badly damaged.

According to the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), around 30 to 40 people are dying from hunger and diseases every day. In Sindh's heavily affected Badin District, at least eight flood-affected people died over the weekend, including two children. Four people died at a relief camp in Tando Bagho, the newspaper *Dawn* reported on Sunday. A three-year-old child died from gastroenteritis and a seven-year-old girl drowned.

Some 850,000 people are living in temporary relief camps, but the majority of the flood-affected are living out in the open. "Over 85 percent of the displaced are still without shelter and food and tens of thousands of others are without clean potable water," according to Reuters. Many have used wooden planks and plastic sheets to build makeshift shelters as they wait for proper shelter and desperately needed relief supplies. About 3 million people are in need of food assistance and medical care. Many of the flood-affected had barely recovered from last year's floods, which affected over 20 million people and caused over \$10 billion in damage.

The receding waters have left stagnant ponds of water, creating breeding grounds for malaria-bearing mosquitoes. Contaminated water threatens displaced flood victims with diseases like cholera and hepatitis. People living in remote regions where health facilities have been destroyed or run out of supplies are particularly vulnerable. The ruined road network has made it difficult to reach these communities, which had suffered from inadequately developed and poorly maintained infrastructure even before the floods. At least 3 million children

are at risk of malnutrition and disease, according to Save the Children.

Over 3 million acres of cropland has been destroyed and one-third of cattle swept away, threatening the livelihoods of thousands of farmers. Three quarters of the cotton crop in Sindh has been destroyed, which will negatively impact on exports and may force Pakistan to import cotton to meet the shortfall. The floods are expected to increase the inflation rate to 16 percent and lower overall economic growth.

Despite last year's devastating floods and early warnings of heavy rain this year, Pakistani authorities failed to develop the early warning systems necessary to evacuate the flood-affected. The government has ignored numerous recommendations from international agencies, failing to invest in flood-resistant housing and construct barriers to prevent the spread of floodwaters. Local residents across Sindh have blamed government incompetence for breaches in the Left Bank Outfall Drain and other saline water drains. Moreover, basic repairs to the dike network have not been carried out since last year's catastrophic floods.

Millions of flood-affected Pakistanis have been left to fend for themselves, with many relying on support from relatives and friends for survival. The government's unpreparedness and pitiful response to the disaster has infuriated working people across Sindh and Balochistan.

On Monday, an aid official told BBC News that PPP politicians and local officials were favoring certain villages when distributing relief supplies. "It is very clear that the ruling party gives preference to its own supporters when it comes to relief aid," a flood-affected man told the BBC.

The PPP-led government remains indifferent to the plight of the flood-affected, who are in immediate need of food, clean water, health care and shelter to avert a far serious humanitarian crisis. Last week 110,000 of the flood-affected received 20,000 rupees worth of assistance in the form of an ATM card, sponsored equally by the Sindh and federal governments. The use of an ATM card to distribute assistance where floods have destroyed much of the infrastructure, however, is simply an attempt to delay the withdrawal of even this meagre sum of money for as long as possible.

According to former National Disaster Management

Authority Chairman Nadeem Ahmed, \$56.8 million from last summer's relief funds remain unutilized, with the government refusing to release the money for relief efforts. Aid agencies have cited the mismanagement of funds by the government after last year's floods as one of the reasons for fundraising difficulties.

The United Nations issued an urgent appeal for \$357 million to finance the provision of food, clean water and shelter for the most vulnerable among the flood-affected, but after four weeks has received only 20 percent of the requested amount.

"Many of the displaced are still living in precarious conditions, untouched by aid efforts. In some of the worst-hit districts in Sindh province, flood victims continue to go hungry," according to the UN Refugee Agency. "With no access to clean drinking water or sanitation, many families are forced to use contaminated water sources."

The UN has repeatedly warned it will run out of money soon if the funds are not received. "Unless we receive new pledges to the Floods 2011 Rapid Response Plan, millions of people will be left in need of food, clean water and essential medicines for months to come," warns UN Humanitarian Coordinator Timo Pakkala.

Ramiro Lopes da Silva, deputy executive director of the World Food Programme (WFP), has also complained about the lack of relief funds provided by the major powers. "If we have no resources, we have no response," he said. "Somehow the present flooding and the humanitarian impact of the present flooding has not yet piqued the interest, the focus of the world."

In an interview with *Dawn*, Dr. Zulfiqar Bhutta, Chair of the Division of Maternal and Child Health at the Aga Khan University, pointed out the increased risk of disease among flood-affected children and the malnourishment that plagues the Pakistani people. "With rising numbers of children suffering from diarrhoea secondary to unsanitary water and hygiene we need to optimise access to clean drinking water and sanitation services," said Bhutta.

"There is little realisation that Sindh has the worst rates of maternal and child under nutrition in the country as exemplified by the nutrition surveys undertaken during the floods last year and confirmed by the recently concluded national nutrition survey. The current floods have just compounded a chronic emergency and underscored the importance of large scale preventive strategies," he added.

The UNICEF has set up 23 new centers for "severely malnourished children" in addition to the 454 that were established in response to the 2010 summer floods. The agency warned of a "major funding shortfall" saying it alone requires \$50.3 million to "cover the immediate needs of children and women for six months." With its emergency fund receiving virtually no support from world governments, the UN on October 6 funneled \$17.6 million in urgently needed relief aid from its Central Emergency Response Fund to aid the most vulnerable families, those needing "life-saving support."

According to the UN, this allocation is the single largest donation it has received thus far to assist Pakistan's flood victims.

Despite repeated appeals for international aid from the Pakistani government and the United Nations, the United States and other major powers have been slow to respond. In recent weeks, the escalating crisis in US-Pakistan relations has preoccupied the country's venal ruling elite. Weeks of accusations and threats from US officials have worsened relations between Washington and Islamabad. Last month, US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen accused the Pakistani spy agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of backing the Haqqani network, believed to be responsible for a series of bold attacks against US-led occupation forces in Afghanistan.

As part of its attempt to force Pakistan to bear the brunt of the neo-colonial Afghan war, the US is demanding that Islamabad crack down on the Haqqani network and launch a new military offensive against militants based in North Waziristan. Washington is seeking to punish Pakistan in various ways after the Pakistani army rejected its allegations and ruled out military action against the Haqqani network. The US has threatened to curtail aid to Pakistan and has made it clear that it would not assist the country in securing a new loan from the International Monetary Fund.

Now Washington is refusing to provide adequate assistance for Pakistani flood victims, offering only \$16 million for the UN's emergency fund when hundreds of millions are required just for initial relief efforts.

Addressing an audience at an event sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars last week, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said that "the situation in Pakistan is likely to remain volatile" and that the US was "fighting a war" in Pakistan.

Panetta's statement came just days after President Barack Obama stepped up pressure on Pakistan, warning that the long-term strategic alliance between Washington and Islamabad is in jeopardy and that Pakistan had to do more to combat Islamist militants. On Thursday, US drone strikes killed 10 people in North and South Waziristan. The US claims a leading member of the Haqqani network, Jamil Haqqani, was killed in one of the attacks.

Washington's response to the floods once again demonstrates how the imperialist powers use humanitarian aid as a political tool, offering or withholding aid based not on human need, but on their predatory aims and strategic interests.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact