

# Climate-change driven floods ravage Pakistan, killing more than 1,100 and threatening millions with hunger and disease

**Sampath Perera**  
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Heavy monsoon rains and climate-change induced glacier melting have produced catastrophic floods and landslides in three of Pakistan's four provinces.

Pakistani authorities have attributed 1,136 deaths to the floods since June 14, including those of over 350 children. The true death toll is undoubtedly higher as rescue crews have been unable to gain access to many flooded areas. Speaking to reporters Sunday after a helicopter tour of the Swat Valley in the north of the country, Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said, "Village after village has been wiped out."

The floods have also destroyed crops, drowned cattle herds and other livestock, swept away houses and devastated Pakistan's already meagre, dilapidated infrastructure.

33 million people, about 15 percent of Pakistan's population of 225 million, are said to have been directly impacted by the floods. With close to a million homes reported to have been destroyed or badly damaged, the numbers sleeping in the open air or tents has swelled into the high hundreds of thousands, possibly millions.

Pakistan's National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA) reported on Tuesday that the flash floods—which began in June, but have swelled to Biblical proportions over the past two weeks—have already destroyed 157 bridges, ruined 3,457 kilometres (about 2,200 miles) of roads, and inundated 2 million acres of agricultural land, killing crops and washing away top-soil.

Pakistan Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal has estimated the cost of the flood damage at \$10 billion, or more than a fifth of the country's total annual budget of \$47 billion.

Approximately a third of the country is currently under water, with Baluchistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces worst affected.

As bad as the official tally of more than 1,100 deaths and 1,500 injuries is, the government figures are widely seen as gross underestimates of the true extent of the catastrophe.

A report published by the UN's ReliefWeb on August 29 observed the "actual [casualty] figures are expected to be significantly higher." It also warned of further impending rainfall, noting, "More devastation is expected in the coming days, which could be unprecedentedly severe."

News reports paint a harrowing picture of social devastation and suffering.

Rasheedan Sodhar, a 25-year-old teacher, told *Al-Jazeera* that she and 19 family members had fled her village near the Arabian Sea in the southern province of Sindh on Sunday as it was submerged by

floodwaters. Their house was destroyed and livestock swept away. "We have nothing left. We are alive, but we are not able to live any more."

The entire Sodhar family is now living in the open air in scorching heat in the nearby town of Mehar. "We barely get one meal a day," said Rasheedan. "Our children are crying all day. [How] can you tell them to stop crying when there is no home for them?"

Muhammad Fareed told BBC that his daughter was killed by the flooding of the Kunhar River, an Indus River tributary, in the northern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. "She told me, 'Daddy, I'm going to collect leaves for my goat.' She went to the bank of the river and a gush of water followed and took her away."

Pakistan has experienced weeks of heavy rainfall, and months of stifling heat since last spring. In March and April, temperatures regularly surpassed 45 degrees Celsius (113 Fahrenheit) and in some places 50 degrees. As of last week, according to the NDMA, Pakistan had experienced 2.87 times more rainfall than the national 30-year average, and in Baluchistan and Sindh more than five times.

Both the extreme heat and torrential rains are connected to climate change. High temperatures result in the retention in the air of more precipitation, which subsequently falls as rain. For every 1 degree Celsius increase in temperature, 7 percent more precipitation is captured in the air.

The extended heat wave has also accelerated long-term glacier melting in the Himalayas and Hindu Kush mountains. This has triggered a phenomenon known as glacial lake outburst floods, as lakes of newly unfrozen water surge down from the Himalayas to swamp large swathes of the country. More than 3,000 glacial lakes have formed in Gilgit-Baltistan and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa regions, with dozens identified by the UN as posing an imminent threat of glacial lake outburst flooding.

The vast majority of Pakistan's population is impoverished. With millions displaced and their livelihoods destroyed, and much of the country inundated by potentially badly-contaminated flood water, there is a grave risk of mass hunger and disease. Both malaria and tuberculosis kill tens of thousands of Pakistanis each year. And as around the world, there is an ever-present threat of new waves of mass COVID-19 infections and deaths.

In a pretense that serves to highlight nothing so much as the ruling elite's indifference to the Pakistani people, the government cynically maintains that just 30,500 people have died from COVID-19 during the more than two-and-a-half years of the pandemic. Studies based on science-based excess mortality projections place the true death toll

between 700,000 and 900,000.

Earlier this week, the United Nations issued a “flash appeal” for a pitiful \$160 million to provide food, sanitation, drinking water, and emergency education to flood victims in response to what it termed a “colossal crisis.”

“Pakistan is awash in suffering,” stated UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. “The Pakistani people are facing a monsoon on steroids—the relentless impact of epochal levels of rain and flooding.”

Even assuming the UN meets its target, which is extremely doubtful given the pathetic sums pledged so far by the major powers, the “flash fund” would provide the equivalent of just \$4.50 for each of the 33 million people impacted by the floods.

For its part, Pakistan’s government has announced a meagre 25,000-rupee (\$112) assistance payment to each flood-affected family. As has been true in previous crises, due to corruption, mismanagement, and the wanton neglect of the authorities, it can be expected that only a fraction of those in need will receive even this tiny sum.

The hypocrisy of the imperialist powers, who never tire of proclaiming their commitment to human rights and democracy to justify one war after another, has been on full display amid the calamity in Pakistan. The United States has to date provided Pakistan a piddling \$100,000 in assistance through USAID. This infinitesimal amount is a miniscule fraction of the additional \$3 billion in military hardware Washington approved to wage war in Ukraine just last week, let alone the \$50 billion US imperialism has pledged in weaponry and assistance to Ukraine since February.

Canada and the UK have pledged similarly derisory sums to Pakistan flood relief, \$5 million and \$1.5 million respectively.

The calamity unfolding in Pakistan is part of a rapidly escalating climate catastrophe around the world. Europe has been in the grip of one of its worst droughts in recorded history this summer, with crops failing en masse, and food and energy supply lines breaking down. In February and March, floods caused by unprecedented rainfall ravaged the coast of Queensland and New South Wales in Australia, killing 22 people and causing over \$1 billion in damage to infrastructure. Dozens of people lost their lives in flooding in the US state of Kentucky earlier this month, while wildfires have raged across Alaska in the far north and near Yosemite National Park in California this summer.

These increasingly deadly events underscore the urgency of a global response to climate change. But as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the profit and geo-strategic interests of the rival cliques of nationally-based capitalist elites, above all those of the United States and other imperialist powers, block the coordinated mobilization of the world’s resources necessary to address and reverse climate change.

Underscoring the irrationality of capitalism, climate change has rapidly become a new source of intense inter-capitalist competition, as countries rush to lay claim to the sea lanes and resources of the Arctic Ocean, now made accessible by the melting of the polar ice cap; and to seize control of the natural resources vital for the production of electrical vehicles and other technologies that are essential for developing a carbon-neutral economy.

Indeed, a major aim of the war that the US and its NATO allies have instigated with Moscow over Ukraine is to subjugate Russia so as to gain unfettered access to its vast energy and mineral wealth.

Pakistan’s flood catastrophe is also an indictment of all factions of its venal capitalist elite. Pakistan’s ruling class has looted and

squandered the country’s resources in alliance with imperialism ever since its creation 75 years ago through the bloody communal partition of the subcontinent.

Countless billions have been squandered in funding Pakistan’s nuclear-armed military, always the linchpin of its reactionary alliance with Washington, and in pursuing its strategic conflict with India.

Decades of International Monetary Fund dictated “structural adjustment programs,” implemented with the aim of making Pakistan a magnet for global investment, have plunged tens of millions of Pakistanis into ever-deeper poverty and hobbled the country with decrepit public health care and education systems.

The current interim coalition government headed by the Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) assumed office in March, with the military’s support, for the express purpose of implementing yet another round of IMF-dictated austerity.

On Tuesday, Planning Minister Iqbal, a top leader of the PML-N, and Sherry Rehman, the PPP climate change minister, pleaded for flood aid from the “international community.” In doing so, Iqbal made the argument that the industrialized, i.e., advanced capitalist, countries have produced the lion’s share of the greenhouse gases responsible for climate change.

None of this, of course, stood in the way of Pakistan’s government securing IMF approval on the very same day for the release of a \$1.1 billion tranche of a suspended emergency bailout package that was conditional on the government imposing massive new burdens on the country’s workers and toilers at the behest of international capital. These include regressive tax increases, the elimination of energy price subsidies, and the accelerated privatization of state assets.

Dutifully enforcing the IMF’s demand that Pakistan’s federal and provincial governments record budget surpluses, the PPP-led Sindh provincial government is forcing government employees to finance its Fund Relief Program by deducting the equivalent of two days’ pay from lower-grade employees and five days’ pay from those in higher grades. Workers forced to pay the levy have remarked that they too are affected by the floods.

Speaking to the *Financial Times* this week, Climate Change Minister Rehman claimed, “In living memory, we have not seen such a biblical flood come to Pakistan.” While it is true that climate change is contributing to the increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events, Rehman is well aware that this is a bald-faced lie. In 2010, when the PPP led Pakistan’s government and was similarly in the process of imposing IMF austerity, Pakistan suffered devastating floods that killed 2,000 people and inundated one fifth of the entire country. At the time, the UN characterized the floods as was “one of the worst humanitarian disasters in UN history.”

In the subsequent 12 years, nothing substantive was done to improve flood-preparedness or public health infrastructure.

In the budget for the financial year that started July 1, Pakistan’s government allocated a mere 100 million rupees (\$455.5 million) to disaster response and emergencies, including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.



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