

Floods, hunger, disease and IMF austerity devastate Pakistan's workers and poor

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The catastrophic climate change-linked floods that have ravaged Pakistan since June and peaked in late August continue to inundate vast swathes of the country.

Torrents of water produced by melting glaciers in the Himalayas combined with an unusually heavy rain season have devastated substantial portions of the country. Millions have been displaced, often with their homes completely destroyed, and tens of millions more are being impacted by the destruction of crops and livestock and much of the country's limited infrastructure.

Since mid-June more than 1,700 people have officially lost their lives due to the floods, among them 615 children. A further 12,000 are reported as injured.

Over 33 million people are variously affected by the floods. As grim as these official figures are, they provide only a pale reflection of the true human toll.

Relief workers are warning of an explosion of disease and hunger in the coming weeks and months, yet Pakistan's ruling elite and the major imperialist powers are doing virtually nothing to provide emergency aid.

Despite the urgent need for billions of dollars to deal with the social disaster and help people rebuild their lives, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has rejected any relaxing of the stringent austerity conditions it attached to the release of the latest \$1.16 billion tranche of its loan program with Islamabad in September. "Policy commitments made by the Pakistani authorities as part of the Seventh and Eighth review under their IMF-support program continue to apply," its resident in Islamabad, Esther Pérez Ruiz, callously told Reuters last Monday.

The government's "policy commitments" mean that it must slash the remaining price subsidies, raise prices of energy products and impose taxes on hitherto exempted products including essentials and medicine. In addition, the provincial governments must produce a budgetary surplus. The unstated assumption behind these stringent orders is that the government must not spend on relief programs, since these would violate the IMF's stipulations.

Assistance from the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)-led government has been limited to payments of 25,000 rupees (less than \$US 115) to 2.6 million families, reported the *Dawn* earlier this week.

Officially 7.6 million are listed as displaced. Yet according to UN data only 600,000 are living in official relief camps. While some may have found refuge with relatives or friends, millions have been left to fend for themselves, living in makeshift camps

and often in the open air, without drinking water and sanitary facilities.

The absence of toilets has forced the displaced to relieve themselves in the open. After losing what little they owned, many flood victims are now threatened by diseases such as malaria, dengue and scabies, child morbidity and malnutrition.

Indicative of the authorities' disorganized and indifferent response to the human tragedy playing out across much of the world's fifth most populous country, there is no systematic government collection of data on the floods and the health and well-being of its victims with a view to mobilizing and distributing desperately needed resources.

Newspaper reports are largely limited to harrowing accounts from victims and aid-workers. BBC spoke to Dr. Ammara Gohar, a member of a medical team that visited several villages in rural Sindh, still cut-off by flood waters, by wooden boat. She spoke of tending to a "severely malnourished" nine-month-old, adding, "there are so many people like this baby."

AFP spoke to parents of an unresponsive child of seven treated for suspected malaria in a "desperately rundown emergency clinic." The child's mother described the squalid conditions in the camp where they are living. "From early evening until dawn, throughout the whole night, the mosquitoes are overwhelming," she said. They and other flood victims are drinking from a well suspected to have been contaminated by flood water. Due to rising flood waters, the family had had to flee twice before settling in the current relief camp. According to the AFP report, Sindh has reported 208,000 cases of malaria in 2022, a substantial increase from last year.

The estimated damage from the flooding has already surpassed \$40 billion. Over 750,000 homes have been destroyed and 1.3 million damaged. 13,000 kilometres of roads, 410 bridges, 2,000 hospitals and health care facilities and 25,000 schools are said to have been destroyed or damaged.

The floods have also devastated the country's crops, with Climate Change Minister Sherry Rehman estimating that 50 percent of the country's breadbasket has been destroyed. The *Guardian* reported on October 12 that four million acres of crops have been destroyed nationally, including rice and cotton. The decimation of crops will directly compound the food supply crisis and hit Pakistan's textile industry hard. Textiles are one of the country's most important exports.

The disruption of agriculture will continue for years to come. In

addition to the destruction of this year's crops, farmers report that they cannot sow wheat, rice, and other crops for next year because water levels have yet to recede. "[W]e have no dry land left," one landowner in Baluchistan's Sohbatpur district told the *Guardian*. Another farmer from Sindh province added, "People have lost their crops and some have also lost their seeds of wheat, which they had kept for new seasons in storerooms and factories."

Amid a slew of reports of widespread disease, hunger and poverty, entirely predictable for an impoverished country such as Pakistan, the United Nations has increased the meagre "urgent" relief fund target it set last month five-fold, from \$160 million to \$816 million. In an October 5 press release, the UN said it was doing so in response to the "growing lifesaving needs of the people." According to Reuters, the UN was able to raise just \$90 million by the time it renewed the appeal, little more than half of the initial woefully inadequate sum.

Even before the floods, Pakistan was reeling from the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic and the US-NATO proxy war on Russia in Ukraine. Decades of IMF austerity and "structural adjustment" programs implemented by all of the parties of the Pakistani elite, including the PML (N), the Pakistan People's Party and Imran Khan's PTI, have placed the overwhelming majority of Pakistan's 225 million people in poverty or one crisis away from it.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has warned a public health disaster is in the making. "The water has stopped rising, but the danger has not," he said last week. "Many more lives than were lost in the floods could be lost in the coming weeks if we don't mobilize greater support for Pakistan."

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs warned that 5.7 million flood survivors will face a serious food crisis between September and November. This adds to some 38 million Pakistanis—more than 16 percent of the population—estimated by the WHO to have been in moderate to severe food insecurity even prior to the floods.

Aid agency Save the Children estimated that 3.4 million children in Pakistan are facing chronic hunger. Its country director in Pakistan, Khuram Gondal, said, "As well as dealing with the wreckage, the country is now facing a full-blown hunger crisis. We simply cannot allow a situation where children are starving to death because we did not act quickly enough."

The World Bank, which is working hand in hand with the IMF and Islamabad's elite to push ahead with privatization, including in the energy and education sectors, warned of a sharp increase of poverty as a result of the floods. It noted that "without decisive relief and recovery efforts to help the poor," between 5.8 and 9 million people will be pushed into poverty—which it defines as living on less than \$1.90 a day.

While the warning is certainly valid, the projections are an underestimate.

General Zafar Iqbal, the coordinator of the National Flood Response and Coordination Centre set up by the government and the military to coordinate relief efforts, said the aid received so far was "a drop in the ocean... If you send 100 planes, they would take 1,600 tonnes, or 2,000 tonnes or maybe 2,500 tonnes of aid material, but we require 300 to 400 tonnes of food every day."

In other words, most of those affected are hungry, sick and desperate for assistance but hardly anything is coming their way.

The total assistance provided by the United States since the beginning of the year to Pakistan, its Cold War-era ally and still a major non-NATO partner, amounts to a pittance of \$56 million.

Between 2002 and 2017, the United States paid Islamabad a staggering \$33.4 billion for the dirty work it rendered to sustain the catastrophic invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. While a minuscule portion of this sum trickled down as humanitarian assistance, the vast majority went to pay for various war-related expenditures, including fattening the pockets of the single most important decision-maker in the country, Pakistan's military. Washington used these large sums of aid as leverage to pressure Islamabad into serving as a US satrap to strengthen American imperialism's position in Central Asia.

The military aid provided to Pakistan over a 15-year period is outstripped by the vast quantities of advanced arms, military hardware and financial aid Washington has flooded into Ukraine. Just the latest shipment on October 4 cost the US \$625 million, bringing the Biden administration's direct "military assistance" to Kiev to \$17.5 billion. The US president, who has authorized over \$66 billion for Ukraine to escalate the war against Russia, recently warned an audience of billionaires to prepare for nuclear Armageddon.

Nuclear-armed Pakistan's PML (N)-PPP coalition government allocated a massive \$7.5 billion, or 16 percent of its total budget, to defense for the 2022–23 financial year, a 12 percent increase over the previous year. While pursuing its own reactionary military-strategic rivalry with India, Pakistan's ruling elite relies upon the military as the bulwark of the capitalist state machine that upholds its privileges and ruthlessly suppresses the democratic, social and economic aspirations of the working class and rural toilers.



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