Editorial: Pakistan's floods, a ruined country

The flood water is draining, but it leaves dreadful problems behind, Sep 16th 2010

FOR anyone grown weary of Pakistani suffering, a moment’s reflection is due. The destruction caused, by two months of flash-flooding in the country’s north and estuary-sized overspills along the Indus river, is on a vast scale (see article). At its height the inundation, still receding in Sindh and southern Punjab, covered a fifth of the country. Over 20m people have been affected, more than by the 2004 Asian tsunami and the 2005 Kashmir earthquake put together (though more were killed in both of those). Nearly 2m houses have been damaged or destroyed. The task is to turn this disaster to some good, however slight. Which means that the world should match kindness to Pakistan with toughness.

To those that have not...

The floods have wreaked untold harm on a place that has already suffered grievously. Pakistan derives about a fifth of its output from agriculture, and much of its most productive cropland is submerged or turned to bog. Perhaps a fifth of its cotton crop has been wiped out. Its artery of roads, bridges and irrigation works, weaving around the Indus, has been smashed. Local economists say the disaster has wiped out any prospect of economic growth this year. Inflation, which at 13% is already a scourge of the poor, is sure to rise.
Pakistan is not about to collapse: a prospect first aired at its bloody creation and dusted off for every war, coup and calamity that has followed. Rumours of an army coup also seem far-fetched. The army is scornful of the government, but not jealous of its brief. Still, this latest disaster makes the country’s problems much worse. Washed-up paupers may provide hands for the jihadists bombing its cities and the insurgencies in two of its provinces. They will also add to lawlessness and disaffection. And Pakistan’s ability to curb these forces has also suffered. Its bureaucrats have been found wanting. Its government, a coalition led by the Pakistan People’s Party, has dealt with the floods like the corrupt and slothful creature that it is. Pakistanis, poor and misruled, are seething.

That amounts to an unanswerable case for foreign aid—even if corruption and inefficiency mean that some of the money is bound never to get into the hands of the needy. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank have so far promised $3 billion in soft loans. America (which already gives Pakistan over $3 billion a year, about half in military support and for its war with the Taliban) has offered $250m and Saudi Arabia $106m. Enough has been raised to feed and shelter around 6m destitute people through the winter, the most pressing need, but more money will be needed to rebuild the country’s infrastructure. Again, the case for aid is strong. Pakistan is a nuclear power in a dangerous neighbourhood. Making it more stable would benefit everyone.

But the money must be spent well, and Pakistan’s record on this is dismal. Its government manages to collect only about 10% of GDP in tax, one of the world’s lowest rates. That’s partly because rich farmers—prominent in politics—escape especially lightly. What money it does collect it spends badly. The government is surviving on an $11.3 billion IMF bail-out, the latest instalment of which is frozen because of its failure to institute promised reforms that would improve tax collection and government. Reconstruction money could bolster the IMF’s case. Foreign donors should, where appropriate, attach conditions of their own to aid schemes.

Yet aid gets you only so far. Ultimately, change is up to Pakistanis themselves. The country’s local administration needs an overhaul. So does Pakistani education, to help get peasants off the sodden land and out of poverty. But the floods have also highlighted how bad Pakistan’s selfish, squabbling politicians are at working together. Instead of uniting, the provinces are aggrieved, each thinking itself undersupplied with flood relief. A belated effort by the provincial and federal governments has produced a scheme to provide 20,000 rupees ($230) to 2m flood-affected families. That is good as far as it goes, but Pakistan needs much more. If ever there was a moment for Pakistani politicians to look up from their own petty rivalries, it is now, as the receding floodwaters reveal a poor, crowded and ruined country.
The helicopter drops over a narrow embankment, showering the skinny men and boys perched on it with flotsam and brown floodwater. They rush forwards, waving and yelling soundlessly against the roar of rotary blades. Six weeks after torrential rains caused the Indus river to break its banks, inundating their mud-walled villages in Rajanpur, a district of southern Punjab, their anguish is not feigned. They are hungry, destitute and still marooned by a floodwater sea.

Through the chopper’s open door, Shahbaz Sharif, chief minister of Punjab, pitches a sack of food, then looks down and heaves out another. The younger brother of Pakistan’s opposition leader and twice prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, whose Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) rules Punjab, Mr Sharif has spent almost every day since the floods hit marshalling dykes and dispensing relief. His rivals accuse him of taking political advantage from the deluge, which at its height submerged a fifth of Pakistan’s area and
affected over 20m people. But the country would be in less calamitous shape if more officials worked as hard as he.

Touching down in Daira Din Panah, a small town with its lovely blue-tiled Sufi shrine surrounded by acres of soggy, dead sugar-cane, the chief minister roused the assembled crowd, promising gifts for the Muslim festival of Eid ul-Fitr, which was celebrated in Pakistan on September 11th. He then visited the town’s clinic, checked that its walls were drying, demanded to see that its x-ray machine was still working, congratulated its exhausted medical staff—then left to perform much the same routine elsewhere.

It was well done. But the tour of three sodden Punjabi districts highlighted huge worries. First, the flood damage is massive. Perhaps a fifth of Punjab’s cotton and cane crops, which are due to be harvested in October, has been destroyed, and no one knows how long it will take before the province’s waterlogged fields can be replanted. Across Pakistan, nearly 2m houses have been damaged or destroyed, including over 1.1m in Sindh province, where the worst flooding remains. Over 5,000km (3,000 miles) of roads and 7,000 schools have been affected. More than 200,000 livestock have drowned.

The UN World Food Programme expects to feed 6m Pakistanis for the next six months. The World Health Organisation is anticipating 1.5m cases of diarrhoea. Yusuf Raza Gilani, prime minister of the federal government, a coalition led by the Pakistan
People’s Party (PPP), has put the economic cost at $43 billion, though few consider that figure credible. The World Bank is preparing a more serious estimate.

No government could cope well with such a calamity, and Pakistan’s is unusually incapable. Punjab is the country’s richest and most populous province but, according to Khalid Sherdil, the head of the provincial Disaster Relief Authority, its government has found only $6m to spend on flood relief. Over half a million houses are said to be damaged in Punjab, yet it has been able to provide only 30,000 tents. Its chief minister said he had no choice but to lead from the muddy front because his district officials, the main dispensers of public services in British-built South Asia, could not otherwise be relied upon. Since the floodwater hit Punjab at the end of August, after flash-floods in northern Swat (where most of the disaster’s 1,800-odd deaths occurred), Mr Sharif has sacked the bosses of two of Punjab’s six worst-affected districts. And he disparaged the rest: “I’ve found most have brains below average.”

The central government has also struggled. Though it had recently devolved many responsibilities to the provinces, its superior resources gave it the lead when the waters rose. But it was slow off the mark. The National Disaster Management Authority, set up at America’s expense after 3m people were displaced by fighting in the Swat area last year, had only a dozen staff and fewer computers. And the government’s efforts to drum up emergency help have shown how unpopular it is.

President Asif Zardari, the PPP’s leader and widower of its assassinated former leader, Benazir Bhutto, was castigated for visiting, by helicopter, his French chateau a few days after the disaster struck. He has an unmatched (though unproven) reputation for corruption. Yet light-fingered supporters of Mr Gilani are allegedly attempting to rival it. As a result, while rattling the tin at home and abroad, Pakistan’s leaders have been forced to issue humiliating assurances that any donations they collect will not be stolen. Mr Gilani, who was once viewed by many as a potential counterweight to the divisive Mr Zardari, has suffered a separate humiliation. It was reported that at least two relief camps he has visited with journalists were of the Potemkin sort, put up for his convenience.

**Flood-damaged rulers**

Foreign donors were also slow to respond to the catastrophe, due to its unfolding nature and, perhaps, its relatively low death toll. But the World Bank and Asian Development Bank have promised $3 billion in soft loans. America has promised to donate $250m and Saudi Arabia $106m. More pledges are expected next month at a gathering of anxious well-wishers, mostly Western and Arab governments, known as the “Friends of Democratic Pakistan”.

Improving matters, this week the government started dispensing 20,000 rupees ($230) in cash, by way of special debit cards, to 2m flood-hit families. This is an excellent idea, tried out in Swat last year. Like the relief effort at large, however, it will inevitably fall short of so many destitute people’s needs. And this is likely to hurt the PPP most because the flooding is mainly in its strongholds, of southern Punjab and Sindh. The especially lamentable response of Sindh’s PPP-run provincial government, which had the clearest warning of the coming spate, may prove particularly damaging to Pakistan’s ruling party.

The bosses of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), formerly known as North-West Frontier Province, where the disaster began, may also be damaged. KP’s government, a coalition
led by the Pashtun-nationalist Awami National Party (ANP), is actually considered to have responded halfway well. That is testament to the lessons it learned during the refugee crisis, but also to the low expectations of it. Corrupt and chaotic, it has scant control over much of its territory, especially areas contested between the army and a loose tribally based Islamist confederation, the Pakistani Taliban. These militants have assassinated many ANP men including, in July, the information minister’s only son.

The jihadists have had a tolerably good flood, though Islamist relief workers have not been nearly as active as they were after a devastating earthquake in Kashmir in 2005, partly because the government has taken steps to prevent them. It is also because Kashmir, which is home to the main jihadist NGO, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, an offshoot of a militant outfit dedicated to fighting in India’s portion of the divided region, was relatively unflooded.

With the army distracted, however, the Taliban have stolen a march. They are said to have regrouped in Mohmand, a tribal area close by the border with Afghanistan, which the army thought it had conquered. This probably lowers the chances of an attack on neighbouring North Waziristan, the main Taliban redoubt, which America has been urging Pakistan’s reluctant army to assault. Meanwhile, after a relative lull in terrorism, several Pakistan cities have suffered sectarian atrocities in recent weeks. Seventy-three people were killed in an attack on Shia Muslims in Quetta on September 3rd, as they paraded to show solidarity with the Palestinians.

Of all Pakistan’s main actors, only the armed forces have emerged from the disaster strongly in credit. Bringing boats and helicopters that the civil powers lacked, they have rescued tens of thousands of stranded people and dispensed much of the government’s aid. Over 70,000 troops have been dedicated to this work. “It was the army’s duty to come in aid of the civil power,” says the army’s spokesman, Major-General Athar Abbas. “It just set to work.” Thanks goodness for that. Then again, considering that by one estimate the armed forces lay claim to a third of Pakistan’s budget, quite right too.

In any event, the army has done itself no harm: burnishing an image sullied during the turbulent end to the regime of Pakistan’s last military dictator, Pervez Musharraf, who stepped aside in 2008. Army relief trucks, emblazoned with the slogan the “Pakistani army and the people are together” draw respectful glances as they surge through thronging Karachi and Lahore, capitals of Sindh and Punjab. Rumour has it they surge around in circles, twice or thrice, for maximum effect.

In a country ruled by generals for much of its history, any upset invites rumours of a coup, and these are now abroad. Indeed, one of the PPP’s coalition partners, Altaf Hussain, leader of the Karachi-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), seemed to call for one. From London, where he lives in exile accused of many crimes in Pakistan, Mr Hussain challenged “any patriotic general” to take “martial-law-like action” against corruption.

According to Punjab’s chief minister, many army officers are itching to intervene to intervene; their chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, demurs. Mr Sharif also expressed two other flood-related fears: that disaffected victims could turn to Islamist militancy, which is entrenched in southern Punjab, or that they might otherwise rise up. “If we do not do our job properly, bury the hatchet and move forward, there’s a danger that the people of this area will march to Lahore and will not spare the elite class,” he said.
Pakistanis certainly have a lot to complain about. Between 2003 and 2010, by one count, nearly 31,000 were killed in jihadist-related violence, including some 10,000 civilians. Three years of economic hardship, partly because of this turmoil, have done wider damage. Economic growth has slowed, from an annual average of 7% in the mid-2000s to 4.4% last year. Many of Punjab’s crucial textiles factories, Pakistan’s industrial heights, are mothballed. Falling global demand and a dire shortage of electricity are to blame, as well as other inefficiencies that make it increasingly hard for Pakistan to compete in low-cost markets. At a Lahore gathering for Eid of old friends, all young professionals, half were absent, having recently emigrated to America, Europe or Dubai. And most of those present planned to follow them.

Troubles in spate

The suffering of poor Pakistanis is infinitely worse. Unemployment is estimated to have risen to around 15%, and inflation, currently 13%, has hardly dipped into single figures in three years. This has eroded much of the progress made on Mr Musharraf’s watch, when the proportion of Pakistanis living below the poverty line fell from 34.5% to 17%, according to the World Bank. The floods have made matters much worse. In Mianwali, a district of northern Punjab, sacks of flour were reported to be selling for triple their pre-deluge value. And those hardest hit have no money at all. They include thousands of landless peasants who built their huts on state-owned river-beds and have lost all.

In Fakirabad Majoki, a village in KP’s stricken district of Charsadda beside the Jindi river, Muhammad Jamil was encamped with his wife and five children beside the rubble that was their home. The floodwater hit the village with particular ferocity, demolishing around 200 houses. Mr Jamil said he awoke at 3am as the waters surged through his front-door. He was able to save himself and his family—unlike three neighbours who drowned that night—but not their tethered buffalo or other possessions. He said they had received food donations from local well-wishers; nothing from the government.
This should suggest how resilient poor people, unused to government help, invariably are. And that is the main reason why Pakistan’s long misrule has not caused worse tumult. Yet it would be surprising if the jihadists could not find willing recruits among the flood-stricken horde. Theirs may be the only offer of alms or employment. Indeed, in parts of Sindh and Punjab that has long been the case.

**Grim prospects but no explosion**

Neither the government nor the generals, who control national security, seem especially disturbed by this prospect. Formerly in cahoots with the militants, who fought India at its behest, the army is less keen on them these days. It has lost over 3,000 men in its war with the Taliban; and fewer jihadists are entering Indian-controlled Kashmir. Yet it is afraid of offending conservative opinion by cracking down on the Islamists. It also fears the disorder this might cause. So where the army is not the jihadists’ target, it does not think it necessary to do much. That may explain its reluctance to assault North Waziristan, which is controlled by an Afghan jihadist (and the army’s sometime friend), Sirajuddin Haqqani. It is also why the sectarian gangs, who draw little opprobrium from Pakistan’s mainstream Urdu media, seem mostly to be beneath the army’s radar.

This is bad news, which promises many more bombings of Shia processions and Ahmadi mosques. Yet there is no chance of the fundamentalists taking over Pakistan; not anytime soon. Its Islamist political parties draw little support. And the militants, divided among themselves, have even smaller followings. Nor does any popular uprising seem likely. Indeed, a more obvious danger is that Pakistanis appear increasingly loth to rally at all.

The country, divided by region, sect and ethnicity, has always been a work in progress. But in its serial crises much of that work is coming undone. The murder of Ms Bhutto, shortly after she returned from her own long exile, robbed the country of its only national leader. Under the discredited Mr Zardari, her party has held together better than some predicted. But the poor performance of its government, exacerbated by the floods, makes its prospects grim. The same is true for the ANP. And there is no compelling alternative to these parties in Sindh or KP.

The parties’ demise, if it comes, is likely to be marked by low voter turnouts and a proliferation of independents, further weakening Pakistan’s democracy. This may help the PML(N), Pakistan’s second-biggest party, whose central and urban Punjabi strongholds have largely escaped the drenching, back to power. Its leader, Nawaz Sharif, who was toppled in 1999 by Mr Musharraf, was freed by a recent constitutional amendment to become prime minister for a third time; and he is more popular than Mr Zardari. Yet his party has also been losing ground in its stronghold, Punjab, and has little support elsewhere. That would make it hard to broker the regional accords that ruling Pakistan increasingly will require.

The weakening of the administration is another sort of disintegration. It was accelerated by a process of devolution introduced by Mr Musharraf, which put the district under elected mayors, not bureaucrats. That was a good idea. Pakistan is too crowded to be represented by only provincial and federal governments. Punjab alone has over 80m people. But the reform was enforced disingenuously, to ensure that Mr Musharraf’s supporters won power, and in spite of resistance from the provincial authorities whose
powers it usurped. Once democracy was restored, these politicians abandoned the policy, to varying degrees, leaving Pakistan’s districts in a motley state of disarray.

In KP and Baluchistan, which has an ethnically based war of its own, the district officials’ removal was believed to have allowed the insurgents in, so the civil servants have more or less been restored. In Punjab and Sindh the issue is politically contested. In Punjab Shahbaz Sharif is no friend to the babus, but dislikes the province’s former elected mayors, who were loyal to a pro-Musharraf schism in his party. In Sindh the MQM is for the reform, which gave it control of the rich cities of Karachi and Hyderabad, and the PPP is against it. These provinces’ districts are now being run by caretaker officials, with similar responsibilities to their extinct predecessors, but with less power. This has left millions of Pakistani worse served by their government than ever.

To reverse its decline, Pakistan needs better administration and devolution. It needs much better standards of education. It probably needs land reform. Most urgently it needs a semblance of political stability, without which all its governments will disappoint, plus enough economic growth to provide employment. Otherwise, as its population grows—to 335m by 2050, according to the UN’s projection—the country could get a lot more ungovernable. And climate change, a possible cause of this year’s fierce rains, may well exacerbate this. If so, it would hit Pakistan’s peasant multitude, already prone to drought and flood, especially hard.

Under the army, the economy invariably perks up. But the generals cannot make Pakistan stable. Mr Musharraf’s regime was proof of that. By harassing his rivals and rewriting the constitution to legitimise his power-grab, he damaged every important institution. He sidelined Parliament, cowed the Supreme Court, kept his political rivals in exile, gutted the bureaucracy—and sullied the army’s standing. This has all contributed to today’s mess.

His successor as army chief, General Kayani, does seem to understand that. He has restored the army’s reputation, in particular by reigniting the campaign against the Taliban, and he has shown no designs on power. Yet he cannot stop himself fiddling in the civil domain. He has slapped back Mr Zardari’s attempts to put the army’s spies under civilian command and to launch a less confrontational diplomacy with India. That is to Pakistan’s cost, on both counts. Moreover, though the country’s politicians may be a sorry lot, their correction is better left to the voters. An election will be held in two-and-a-half years, if the government is not derailed before then. Fingers crossed.