



Pakistan's floods: broader implications

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The unusually severe monsoon rains which arrived in Pakistan on 22 July have added a humanitarian crisis to the security, political and economic challenges with which the country was already grappling. As the flood waters have receded, they have left behind devastation of lives, property and infrastructure. And they have also exposed with yet greater clarity Pakistan's political and institutional shortcomings. The effects and implications will extend beyond the 12% of the Pakistani population who have been directly affected by the floods and will impinge upon the policy objectives of the US-led coalition engaged in Afghanistan.

Direct effects: The flood waters from the Indus River system have cut a broad swathe from the north to the south of the country, submerging some 160,000km², about a fifth of its total landmass.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 20.6 million of Pakistan's 168m population have been directly affected; 1.8m homes have been destroyed or damaged; more than 4m people have been rendered homeless, 1.8m of whom, mainly women and children, have been accommodated in schools and makeshift shelters; 1,838 people have been killed and 2,785 injured. Agriculture and (already weak) infrastructure have been devastated; crops can neither be harvested nor sown. Loss of the cotton crop will induce lay-offs in the textile sector, the second-biggest industrial employer. In Sindh province, in the south, the waters have been particularly slow to recede because of the high clay content of the soil. The major city of Jacobabad was cut off for 28 days.

No evidence has emerged as to whether any of the infrastructure surrounding Pakistan's nuclear or other military capabilities has been affected.

Aid efforts: Precise levels of new assistance are hard to estimate as many announcements by national and international donors include funds diverted from pledges or allocations originally intended for other purposes. There are often significant mismatches between pledges and actual disbursements. According to press reports, the United States has pledged \$150m (USAID records that a total of \$261m of USAID and State Humanitarian Aid has been pledged or obligated for Pakistan in the year ending in March 2011); the European Union \$135m; and the World Bank has diverted a \$1 billion interest-free loan – which was already programmed – for more immediate recovery efforts, as well as long-term reconstruction. The Asian Development Bank is similarly redirecting pre-existing allocations for Pakistan. Other significant bilateral donations or pledges include \$105m from Saudi Arabia, mainly in the form of goods rather than cash, and \$100m from the United Kingdom. The scale and pace of donations from charities has been variable, despite widespread news coverage of the floods, possibly as a result of doubts about the effectiveness of its disbursement. In this context, in early September the World Bank's vice-president for South Asia, Isabel Guerrero, stressed the importance of Pakistan pursuing accountability, transparency and economic reform.

It is similarly difficult to assess the extent to which pledges are likely to measure up to actual needs. Aid agencies have reportedly estimated the potential cost at several billion dollars. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank are jointly drawing up a Damage and Needs Assessment which is due to be completed in mid-October. Having already warned that 'massive scaled-up donor support will be needed', on 17 September UNOCHA revised its Pakistan Floods Emergency Response Plan, and launched its largest-ever appeal for a total of \$2bn (this includes \$412m already raised in response to its initial appeal). As things now stand, UNOCHA has raised but 21% of this total, and only 22% of its assessed requirements for water, sanitation and hygiene have been met.

Actual needs are many and diverse. Bridges, power supplies and distribution systems were destroyed.

Food, clean water, sanitation facilities, medical and nutritional supplies and vaccines are needed. Both the US and the UK diverted military airlift including helicopters from military operations in Afghanistan for relief purposes. The US provided the Pakistan

government with unmanned aerial vehicles to help assess damage. UK Royal Air Force aircraft supplied ten bridge-making kits for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Wider implications: The impact of the floods, however, will extend well beyond the humanitarian sphere. They have highlighted and may exacerbate several pre-existing fundamental challenges, many of which impinge on regional and international interests. Previous natural disasters have had deep consequences for Pakistan. For example, mismanagement following the Bhola cyclone in 1970, which struck what was then East Pakistan and Indian West Bengal, foreshadowed a massive electoral victory for the Awami League, the 1971 war and the subsequent break-away of what is now Bangladesh.

The Pakistani government, elected in 2008 after nearly a decade of military rule, conspicuously failed to rise to the challenges posed by the floods. While a calamity of such magnitude may be beyond the administrative capacity of any government, Islamabad was unable to craft a national disaster-relief strategy or to mobilise available resources. *The Dawn* reported that only 10% of the National Assembly participated in a parliamentary debate on the floods in early September, and that the discussion was dominated by extraneous issues. It was left, by default, to the army to step into this familiar political vacuum, and it has further strengthened its role and status within the country.

The absence abroad during the early stages of the crisis of President Asif Ali Zardari, who was photographed travelling by helicopter from a chateau in France acquired when his late wife, Benazir Bhutto, was prime minister, has further diminished his popularity – which polls assessed to have been as low as 20% even before the floods. However, Zardari's main political opponent, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, whose rating stood at 71%, showed little desire to assume the leadership, perhaps reluctant to take responsibility for dealing with so many simultaneous problems.

At the same time, the always-fractious relationship between the provinces and the central government, which is perceived to be dominated by a Punjabi majority and vested interests, has been worsened by complaints of neglect from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan and Sindh, and by fierce squabbling over shares of flood money. Funds have allegedly been denied to minorities and political

opponents. Authoritative reports that landowners breached dykes in order to protect their crops, causing further flooding in neighbouring villages and properties, have underlined the role of feudal interests, particularly in southern Punjab and Sindh. The Chief Minister of Punjab, Shahbaz Sharif, has established a judicial commission to investigate the allegations.

Jihadist groups: On the international stage, in his appeals for more aid Zardari made much of the risk that terrorist groups would capitalise on the situation. This struck a chord in the US, where Senator John Kerry was reported to have declared that 'we don't want additional jihadists (and) extremists coming out of a crisis'. Since this line of argument had become a familiar tactic on the part of successive Pakistani leaders, it risked being discounted as another attempt to make others pay for the consequences of the state's failure to assume its responsibilities. But the engagement of 60,000 security forces in flood-relief operations inevitably meant that resources were being diverted from the Pakistani army's anti-insurgency operations in the tribal areas.

Sectarian violence flared up, with 110 people killed in the first ten days of September in bombings directed against minorities and the police. Militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Tayiba, Jaish-e-Mohamed and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami, operating under a variety of aliases, have been raising funds in Karachi and distributing the proceeds to flood victims. Similar activities by such groups, which have the advantage of close and long-standing ties with local communities, had added to their standing after the Kashmir earthquake in 2005. To the extent to which they are visible and effective, such groups offer a contrast to the weak central government and, implicitly or explicitly, an alternative in terms of practical effect and ideology. Meanwhile the Pakistani Taliban has urged the government not to accept Western relief aid and has allegedly threatened to kill Western relief workers.

Cross-border repercussions: Jihadist militancy in Pakistan is intricately bound up with events in Afghanistan and the wider region. To the extent that the aftermath of the floods alters the security and political balance in Pakistan, it will also, therefore, have international implications. Dialogue in major NATO nations is focusing increasingly on the prospect of a draw-down of the NATO-led forces currently

battling the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. It is clear, however, that the growth of violent jihadism in Pakistan since 2005 needs to be factored into strategic assessments as the options for future involvement in the region are considered. The impact of the floods could add a new dimension to such calculations.

While it has been argued (including by the IISS) that the West should limit itself to its original goal in Afghanistan of destroying al-Qaeda, the threat from which has now been reduced, and preventing its return, an additional point to be taken into account is that the threats emanating from the region have changed since the US-led intervention in 2001. For example, insurgent groups based in FATA and southern Punjab, though they are neither part of the Afghan Taliban nor of al-Qaeda, nonetheless have political and operational links with those organisations. Ethnic Pashtuns are predominant in southern Afghanistan (including in the Afghan Taliban) and in much of northwestern Pakistan, as well as being heavily represented in other areas such as northern Baluchistan and the southern city of Karachi. If Pakistanis' disappointment with their governing institutions were to become even more active and widespread, it is possible that relationships between Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line could develop even further, leading to the revival of a movement towards 'Pashtunistan'.

It is also possible that the political shock induced by the floods and a successful reconstruction effort entailing abundant job opportunities will stimulate new thinking and bring about hitherto-elusive beneficial structural change in Pakistan. But this can by no means be taken for granted.

(map below)



MapAction

Pakistan: Flood Affected Districts (06 September 2010)



OCHA

