

Last Chance for Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

Though it has received only moderate attention in the western press, the torrential flooding of large swaths of Pakistan since late July may be the most catastrophic natural disaster to strike the country in half a century. But even greater than the human cost of this devastating event are the security challenges it poses. Coming at a time of widespread unrest, growing Taliban extremism, and increasingly shaky civilian government, the floods could lead to the gravest security crisis the country—and the region—has faced. Unless the international community takes immediate action to provide major emergency aid and support, the country risks turning into what until now has remained only a grim, but remote possibility—a failed state with nuclear weapons.

Since the upper reaches of the Indus and other rivers in Northern Pakistan first flooded their banks over three weeks ago, the floods have spread to many other parts of the country, submerging dozens of villages, killing thousands, uprooting some 20 million people, and leaving millions of poor children and infants at terrible risk of exposure to water-borne diseases. But the next few months could be even worse, as the collapse of governance and growing desperation of flooded areas leads to increasing social and ethnic tensions, terrible food shortages, and the threat that large parts of the country, now cut off from Islamabad, will be taken over by the Pakistani Taliban and other extremist groups.

A key part of the security problem lies in the already precarious situation of the regions most affected. The floods and heavy rain have caused the worst damage in the poorest and least literate areas of the country where extremists and separatist movements thrive: this includes the northern region, near Afghanistan, but also parts of Balochistan and Sindh provinces in the south. By contrast, central Punjab, the country's richest region, with incomes and literacy about double that of other parts of the country, has been relatively unscathed by the disaster. The longstanding resentment by ethnic groups in the smaller provinces against Punjab is thus likely to increase.

The situation in the north is particularly critical. Now inundated by floodwaters, the poverty stricken North Western Frontier Province—now officially known as Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa (KP)—is a haven for both the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban. Millions of people have lost their homes and taken flight only a few months after many of them had returned following a successful offensive against militants by the Pakistan army.

In the Swat valley, where the army had flushed out extremists only a year ago, every single bridge has been destroyed and roads washed away. Across the province hundreds of miles of electricity pylons and gas lines have been ripped out, power stations flooded, and livestock and standing crops decimated by as much as 50 percent. All this will dramatically loosen what little control the state had managed to sustain over outlying areas—especially those bordering Afghanistan, which could now be quickly captured by local Taliban.

Another major recruitment center for extremists are the rural plains of southern Punjab and northern Sind, which suffer from underdevelopment and widespread poverty. Now, these regions too are drowned in water. Lacking any prospects for meaningful employment or education, more young men from these regions will join the militants, who are already proclaiming that the floods represent God's wrath against the government.

In Balochistan, the large province in southwestern Pakistan that skirts Afghanistan's southern border, the floods have deepened an already existing crisis. The country's poorest region, Balochistan, has long hosted a separatist insurgency as well as Afghan Taliban bases (Quetta, the provincial capital, has been a haven for a number of senior Taliban leaders). Now, flash floods have destroyed infrastructure and what little was working in the region's below-subsistence economy; the state's fragile control of the region has become even more tenuous, as Baloch separatists, blaming the government for poor relief efforts, are urging a stepped up struggle

for independence. (The last time such major floods hit the country in the late 1960s, the inadequacy of the government's response led in part to the secession of east Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh.)

Meanwhile, the floods have had little effect on the rampant violence by extremists and other groups that has been occurring across the country. The Pakistani Taliban continue to carry out suicide bombings and have vowed to wipe out the country's government leaders while in Karachi, inter-ethnic violence between political parties representing the Pashtun, Sindhi and Urdu speaking communities has resulted in some 100 deaths in the past four weeks. Since the flooding began, the Taliban have also been seeking to prevent Pakistani non-governmental organizations from carrying out relief work by threatening their workers, while encouraging militant groups who have set up their own relief camps to expand.

Much now depends on the ability of the government and its foreign allies to bring relief to flood victims. Tens of thousands of Pakistani troops and virtually the army's entire helicopter fleet are now involved in the effort. But its resources are way overstretched, and for months to come the army is unlikely to be in a position to even hold the areas along the Afghan border that it has recently won back from the militants, let alone initiate any new campaigns against the Taliban.

That means the war in Afghanistan is about to become even more bloody. US and NATO efforts to secure southern Afghanistan and new US troop deployments in eastern Afghanistan will be affected, as more militants come across the border.

With the chronic shortage of foodstuffs and the beginning of the fasting month of Ramadan, food prices have already doubled, raising the prospect of social tensions and even food riots. Amid overbearing heat and humidity, electricity production is down by one third across the country, leaving those rural areas where power lines are still standing without electricity for up to 18 hours a day.

So far the international aid response, apart from the US and Britain, has been next to pathetic. The US is providing some US \$71 million and has sent 19 helicopters from Afghanistan and from US carriers stationed off the coast of Karachi. Britain has given US \$31 million. But as international aid organizations like Oxfam have complained, donations from the European Union, NATO countries, and especially the Islamic world have been negligible. The UN appeal for US \$459 million to cover immediate relief for the next ninety days is not even half met yet.

Once there is sufficient humanitarian relief, the most urgent need is for donors to rebuild bridges, restore power, and reopen roads, especially in the strategic KP province. Pakistan's coffers are empty and the country is entirely dependent on a US \$11.3 billion loan from the IMF. If it is to deliver any kind of effective response to the crisis, Pakistan's government must be bolstered by the international community.

For its part, India has failed to respond to the crisis, and relations between the two countries remain locked in bitter animosity, especially as India blames this summer's uprising in Indian Kashmir on Pakistan. Major international pressure is needed for both countries to sort out their acute differences over the control of their common river systems and the building of new dams on both sides of the border. (The sources of many of the rivers that flow into Pakistan are in Indian-controlled territory either in the Himalayas or Kashmir. There have been recent rise in tensions with Pakistan accusing India of building unauthorized dams on these rivers upstream.) Indian relief goods, cheaper food, and construction materials should be immediately allowed to enter Pakistan.

The Pakistani floods are more than just floods. They herald a potential regional catastrophe. Unless the West acts quickly, the situation could rapidly become too difficult to contain.

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