

Pakistan floods: an emergency for the West

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Unless we act decisively, large parts of flood-stricken Pakistan will be taken over by the Taliban, writes Ahmed Rashid.

By Ahmed Rashid

Pakistan's floods have not just devastated the lives of millions of people, they now present an unparalleled national security challenge for the country, the region and the international community. Lest anyone under-estimate the scale of the disaster, all four of Pakistan's wars with India combined did not cause such damage.

It has become clear this week that, unless major aid is forthcoming immediately and international diplomatic effort is applied to improving Pakistan's relations with India, social and ethnic tensions will rise and there will be food riots. Large parts of the country that are now cut off will be taken over by the Pakistani Taliban and affiliated extremist groups, and governance will collapse. The risk is that Pakistan will become what many have long predicted - a failed state with nuclear weapons, although we are a long way off from that yet.

The heavy rain and floods have devastated the poorest and least literate areas of the country, where extremists and separatist movements thrive. Central Punjab - the country's richest region, where incomes and literacy are double those of other areas - has escaped the disaster. The resentment felt towards Punjab by ethnic groups in the smaller provinces is thus likely to increase.

In Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa (KP), formerly the North Western Frontier Province, where both the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban are based, millions of people have lost their homes and are on the move - this just a few months after many of them had returned home after successful military offensives against militants in the Swat valley. Now every single bridge in the Swat valley has been destroyed and the roads washed away.

Across the province, hundreds of miles of electricity pylons and gas lines have been ripped out, power stations have been flooded, and at least half of the livestock and standing crops have been destroyed. All of this will dramatically loosen the state's control over outlying areas, in particular those bordering Afghanistan, which could be captured quickly by local Taliban.

The poverty-stricken plains of southern Punjab and northern Sind, another major recruitment centre for extremists, have also been drowned. Millions of acres of crops have been destroyed and villages washed away. Joblessness and helplessness will lead to more young men joining the militants, who are propagating the idea that the floods are God's wrath against the government.

In Balochistan, the country's poorest region, which is beset with a separatist insurgency as well as hosting Afghan Taliban bases, flash floods and heavy rain have destroyed infrastructure and the below-subsistence economy. Baloch separatists are already blaming the government for poor relief efforts and urging a stepped-up struggle for independence.

And the floods have not stopped the rampant violence in the country. The Pakistani Taliban continue to carry out suicide bombings and assassinations and have vowed to wipe out the Awami National Party which governs KP province. The Taliban are now threatening to prevent Pakistani non-governmental organisations from carrying out relief work, while allowing militant groups who have set up their own relief camps to expand. In Balochistan, separatist violence goes on, while in Karachi, inter-ethnic killings have continued, with more than 100 murders in the past four weeks.

More than 60,000 Pakistani troops, many of whom were recently fighting the Taliban in KP, and virtually the entire helicopter fleet of the army, are now involved in flood relief. For months to come the army is unlikely to be in a position even to hold the areas along the Afghan border that it has won back from the militants.

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 expected this month in eastern Afghanistan - will be affected, as more militants come across the border. The Taliban see the floods as a huge opportunity for recruitment in Pakistan, rather than a disaster.

Moreover, the truly catastrophic long-term destruction is to infrastructure and communications, and that will badly affect any campaign by the Pakistan army against the Taliban for years to come. Terrorists who have used border regions for training and contact with al-Qaeda will find it even easier to do so with the collapse of governance.

With the chronic shortage of foodstuffs and the beginning of the fasting month of Ramadan, food prices have doubled or even tripled, which is likely to lead to acute social tensions. Vegetables are becoming scarce and the lack of livestock is already creating serious shortages of meat and milk for children.

So far, the international aid response, apart from American and British contributions, has been next to pathetic, something for which the US Special Envoy for the region, Richard Holbrooke, has publicly castigated America's allies. Britain has "earmarked", in the FCO's phrase, up to £31.3 million, while the US is providing some \$71 million and has sent 19 heavy lift helicopters.

The proceeds of the Kerry-Lugar Bill, which sanctioned \$1.5 billion a year for five years for development projects in the civilian sector in Pakistan, are now likely to be diverted to flood relief. It is helpful that such money is available, but vital development projects on which the money should have been spent will now be halted.

Donations from the European Union, Nato countries and especially the Islamic world have been negligible, prompting international aid organisations such as Oxfam to complain of the lack of response. The UN appeal for \$459 million to cover immediate relief for the next 90 days is so far not even half fulfilled.

Once there is sufficient humanitarian relief, the most urgent need is for donors to deliver project assistance to rebuild bridges and restore power and roads, particularly in the strategic KP province. The government's ineffectiveness and lack of response so far has been much criticised, but the reality is that Pakistan's coffers are empty and the country is entirely dependent for economic survival on a long-term \$11.3 billion loan from the IMF.

India has failed to respond to the crisis and there remains bitter animosity between the two countries, particularly because India blames the current uprising in Indian Kashmir on Pakistan - even though Indian commentators admit that it is more indigenous than Pakistan-instigated.

Help is needed for the two countries to sort out their acute differences over their common river systems, the building of new dams on both sides of the border and the need to allow Indian relief goods, as well as cheaper food and construction materials, to enter Pakistan easily. International agencies would find it much simpler and cheaper to buy such goods from India rather than shipping them in from further afield.

None of this is going to be possible unless there are international diplomatic efforts to get the two rivals to talk to one another. India should understand that it does not further its own national security to have a destitute Pakistan on its borders.

Finally, the crisis adds urgency to the need for the US and Nato to open talks with the Afghan Taliban. A huge influx of Pakistani Taliban into Afghanistan, recruiting thousands more fighters from flood-affected Pakistan as they go, would seriously undermine the Afghan government and Nato.

The floods are more than a natural disaster: they herald a potential regional catastrophe that has to be met with far more determination, generosity and diplomacy than the West has shown so far.

Ahmed Rashid's latest book is 'Descent into Chaos: the United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia' (Viking). A revised edition of his best-selling 'Taliban' has been reissued by IB Tauris.