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Pakistan Floods: Internally Displaced People and the Human Impact

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Pakistan's floods have submerged one-fifth of the country, bringing destruction and deprivation to some 20 million people. Some 1,800 are dead and about 3,000 are injured, but the major impact is in property damage and, looking ahead, disruption of millions of people's livelihood. Millions lost homes and possessions. Displaced people who return confront massive dislocation. The experience has left the civilian government even more dependent on the army than before. The social, economic, and political consequences will be with us for a long time; they present both a problem and an opportunity for building a better system.

The floods that began last July are on a scale that not seen in Pakistan for at least a century. Unlike the earthquake that shattered Azad Kashmir five years ago, this was not a one-time event but a rolling disaster. The floodwaters worked their way down the backbone of the country, starting in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and moving relentlessly through Punjab and Sindh. The water arrived in a rush and departed slowly. Not until mid-October had the floods receded from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, FATA, and Punjab, while areas of Sindh continue to be submerged.

What was destroyed? The floods washed away massive amounts of fixed assets, including close to 2 million homes, 400 miles of roads (including those connecting parts of the country with few transportation alternatives), 46 bridges, and railway lines. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank estimate infrastructure damage at \$9.7 billion. Standing crops were destroyed in many of the flooded areas. It will not be clear until mid-November whether the water has gone down enough and whether enough topsoil remains to plant the winter wheat crop, Pakistan's largest food crop.

Impact on people: The floods largely spared Pakistan's principal urban centers, but they affected the lives of millions in small cities and villages as well as rural areas, some with high population density. About 1,550,000 were displaced, initially to camps in dryer areas. The camps are run primarily by the provincial governments as well as by local and foreign nongovernmental organizations. There have been the expected problems with diarrhea, respiratory, and water-related skin diseases, but Pakistan's medical authorities have been pleasantly surprised by the absence of major epidemics. They believe that the key to preventing major outbreaks of disease in the future will be the supply of clean water—a more complicated logistical undertaking than providing medical care.

The status of these internally displaced people (IDPs) varies considerably around the country. In Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, provincial authorities report that around 95 percent of IDPs have been able to return to their homes. In Sindh province, however, nearly 85 percent of the affected population remains displaced. Once they return, they face the problem of rebuilding their houses and resuming their livelihoods, most importantly agriculture.

Rural-urban shift: With the lengthy progression of the flooding and the slow departure of the waters, some IDPs may consider migrating to the city. The decimation of agriculture, cattle raising, and infrastructure has created a degree of uncertainty about the lives of IDPs upon their return, mitigating some of the risks of urban migration at the individual level.

The outskirts of Karachi, a city of 18 million, have served as a refuge for some hundreds of thousands of Sindhi IDPs since the floods hit Sindh province in mid-August. Most have come from the 30 provincial camps in the surrounding region. If they decide to stay, it would play into Karachi's already combustible ethnic mix. Most of Karachi's people come originally from northern India (and are called Muhajirs in Pakistan), but Karachi is also home to millions of Pashtuns—estimates run as high as 7 million. Although the well-reported violence in mid-October was induced by political struggle between the Muhajir supporters of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and the Pashtuns of the Awami National Party (ANP), rivalry with Sindhi nationalist groups rose to the fore after the floods. On August 23, police and paramilitary forces fired tear gas and live ammunition at refugees who had been squatting in unoccupied apartments, killing 3 and injuring 16. There have been no other major reported incidents involving IDPs. However, it is clear that the new stream of refugees may aggravate these historic pressures.

The rapid influx of flood IDPs to Pakistan's cities accelerates an existing trend of natural and violence-related urban growth. Disaster-related population flows will put pressure on existing infrastructure. Slums and congestion will increase and electricity and sewage systems will feel the strain. While Karachi and Lahore stand to absorb the greatest number of new immigrants, there has been little planning by these cities' authorities to ensure that infrastructure development matches the influx of people. Although reconstruction will naturally be focused on flood-affected areas, government officials at all levels would be wise to invest in improving city infrastructure to match the needs of the migrants. The creation of formal employment opportunities, particularly in the industrial sector, may alleviate potential problems. Unemployed labor may increase social discontent and petty crime.

Internal rural migration and its implications: One consequence of the floods is likely to be a rash of land disputes. The floods have swept away landmarks, and many official documents have disappeared. While rising remittances from migrant family members may increase the mobility and financial independence of land tenants in the countryside, it is likely that they will remain the worst affected.

Some observers suggest that the disaster will change the feudal system under which much of Pakistan's rural farming areas still operate. What is more likely is that it will exacerbate the competition for land and work among the "have-nots" of the large landholdings in Sindh and southern Punjab. Hard times generally reinforce existing dependency relationships in parts of Pakistan that have large landholdings. The Pakistan floods, although prompting a measure of demographic change, have not had the radical impact on the will of the federal government that would be required to counter this trend.

Longer-term relief: As the winter approaches, the IDPs still in camps will continue to need food, water, and, ultimately, work. Many NGOs are wary of continuing emergency relief aid over such a long period. The effect of handouts could be very detrimental to an economy already dangerously weakened by loss of economic activity induced by the floods. Several strategies have emerged to help promote reconstruction and human development in the interim periods. These include cash-for-work programs, educational programs for children, and adult vocational skills training.

Cash-for-work programs are being implemented by the International Labor Organization and several NGOs. With funding from the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the ILO program has been able to offer 43,200 flood-affected men and women temporary employment in public projects helping with cleanup and reconstruction. According to the international NGO MercyCorps, which is also running a cash-for-work program for flood-affected people, this strategy has considerable advantages over other programs such as food-for-work. Cash-for-work programs empower affected people to prioritize their own needs, increase the liquidity of the local economy, and avoid the pitfalls of delayed delivery or impact on the local agricultural market. Farmers who will have a livelihood to return to after their land is rehabilitated should be targeted as participants to avoid income dependency on the programs, which are only a temporary means of employment.

Many temporary education programs have been instituted for children whose school year has been disrupted by the floods. UNICEF reports that nationally more than 11,000 schools have been damaged and around 6,000 are serving as shelters for IDPs.

With the support of UNICEF, the Government of Pakistan has set up approximately 450 learning and recreation centers in flood-relief camps reaching around 38,000 children, out of a school-age population of approximately 45 million. UNICEF has also been vitally involved in rehabilitating schools and providing school supplies to teachers and students once floodwaters recede. Schools are being used as an outreach point for teaching sanitation. Many NGOs have developed temporary education programs either in partnership with or independent of UNICEF; however, these efforts appear fragmented. Ensuring that a standardized government-approved curriculum is being followed in NGO education programs would help ensure a measure of quality and consistency across the camps and better prepare children to re-enter the school system at a later date.

From relief to reconstruction: The bigger and more important challenge is to reestablish—or in some cases establish—required services in areas where flood-affected people have moved back. Part of the affected area had had at best very thin government services before the flood. The Swat Valley, for example, had famously been the scene of an open insurgency that had been put down by the army. What few health, education, administrative, and justice facilities existed before the floods have been largely washed away. Pakistan’s director general for health, Dr. Rashid Jooma, said at a meeting at CSIS on October 21 that many of the patients who came to the government’s post-flood medical clinics were receiving health care for the first time. He argued that a major challenge of the health system was to create a functioning system in the places from which these people had been displaced. A similar strategy can be adopted for other government-provided services.

Pakistani response: The primary Pakistani response came from the army, which is the only institution with the heavy equipment, trained work force, and organization to operate in areas where transportation and communication have been devastated. Unfortunately, given the long history of difficult civil-military relations in Pakistan, this has reinforced the sense among many parts of the public that the government’s civilian arms are incapable of doing much and that the army is the country’s only functioning institution.

As in the past, many local organizations have participated in relief work. Some have been quite effective, but in most cases they simply do not have the scale of operations or heavy equipment needed to have an impact on a massive and dynamic disaster of this sort. Some of these were Islamic militant organizations, acting within the Islamic tradition of almsgiving but presumably also looking for new adherents. Concerns about the political impact of these Islamic organizations are probably overblown, however. Like their secular counterparts, the religious relief workers, however dedicated, generally cannot do flood relief on the scale needed to have a major impact—economically or politically.

Implications for the United States: This crisis comes at a time when the United States and Pakistan have suffered serious disagreements over the management of U.S.-Pakistan relations and of the war in Afghanistan. A cross-border incident in late September in which U.S. forces killed three Pakistani border guards led to the 10-day closing of the border checkpoint most heavily used by NATO forces bringing supplies into Pakistan.

The U.S. response to Pakistan’s floods has been generous and has been facilitated by the availability of substantial aid funds that could be redirected. By the end of September, close to \$360 million had been transferred through USAID, along with in-kind donations of camp supplies and food aid.

The United States opted for a relatively low-key approach to publicity for its assistance. This assistance has been appreciated but has not had the popular resonance observed at the time of the Kashmir earthquake in 2005. Relief and reconstruction are bound to be a continuing priority and will reinforce the U.S. inclination to shift more of its aid toward infrastructure.

The most important challenge for both Pakistan and the United States, however, will be the Pakistan government's need to take charge of the reconstruction effort and to demonstrate to its own people that the government is able to provide for their welfare.

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