UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE
PEACEBRIEF 46
United States Institute of Peace • www.usip.org • Tel. 202.457.1700 • Fax. 202.429.6063
August 17, 2010

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Flooding Challenges Pakistan's Government and the International Community

Summary

- The flooding and associated devastation that have battered Pakistan since late July 2010 present yet another series of challenges to its government, already contending with violence from extremist groups. The international community would do well to assist the Pakistani government in responding effectively to these challenges.
- Natural disasters are social as well as environmental events. The poor and marginalized members of society suffer the most. Marginalization is one of the causes of violence and militancy in Pakistan.
- As the government of Pakistan responds to the suffering of its people and the damage to the environment and infrastructure, it should seek to provide relief and recovery assistance in ways that contribute to ameliorating marginalization.
- Disaster managers should ensure that urgent humanitarian demands do not miss the opportunity to achieve relief and recovery in ways that contribute to good governance, sustainable development and stable peace.

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Introduction

Since late July 2010, Pakistan has been battered by the most devastating flooding in its history. The hardest hit areas have been the fertile, agricultural plains of northwestern Pakistan, which includes the districts of Nowshera, Charsadda, and Swat in the newly named Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KP) province, formerly called the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). Along with the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), KP in recent years has been the scene of suicide bombings, as well as Taliban offensives and Pakistani military offensives. The present humanitarian disaster has caught both the government and the population during one of the most difficult moments in Pakistan's history, when poverty is worsening, the grip of extremists is increasing, and bombings are occurring on a regular basis. Indeed, the chief of Frontier Constabulary (FC) was killed in a suicide attack in Peshawar on August 4 during the initial onslaught of the flooding.

By August 16, some 20 million people had been affected and more than 1,600 killed nationwide, while thousands of others remain trapped due to flood damage to infrastructure. And these figures are rising daily, as is the toll in other parts of the country. There is little information about the situation in the FATA, although it is known that serious damage occurred in Mohmand and Khyber

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Agencies, destroying the infrastructure already damaged by militants. The worst hit districts are Swat, Dir, Mardan, Charsadda, Nowshera, and parts of D.I.Khan and Swabi.

Nowshera and Charsadda, the more affluent and more peaceful districts of KP, were unprepared for the initial flooding. Although warnings were issued, they were not heeded by the population, partly because people are accustomed to staying home during crises, and partly because the government and local administration did not succeed in communicating the gravity of the impending disaster. Additionally, although residents were asked to leave their homes, no alternatives were offered. Two weeks later, thousands who did leave their homes remained on the highways. Others who did leave found their homes looted and destroyed upon returning home.

Infrastructure damage has prevented relief trucks from delivering emergency food and supplies to Swat and Dir, while continued bad weather has grounded relief helicopters. A United Nations World Food Program (WFP) logistics officer recently said that food in the WFP's warehouses had been destroyed. "Even the wheat in trucks ready to unload has been destroyed by rain. Every truck has 14 layers of wheat bags. Eight out of these are under water."

At the same time, food items are decreasing from the markets in Peshawar due to crop loss in the vegetable and fruit producing areas of Nowshera, Charsadda, and Mardan. These regions supply food to the entire KP province, including the city of Peshawar, with its 3 million inhabitants, and they are sources for the livelihoods of KP's rural population. Given the scope of destruction in the rural areas, farmers may be unable to recover in time for the upcoming planting season. Crop and livestock losses will affect long-term livelihood and food security. International organizations already estimate that more than 6 million people nationwide will require food assistance in the coming weeks and months.

Governmental response during the initial days of the flooding was reportedly viewed by the population as insufficient and showing a lack of will by political leaders. One local resident recently stated, "The politicians didn't even bother to visit their own constituencies." Pashtun society is based upon traditional values of interaction, and not being there for the people is an omission no one forgets. People feel neglected by their own ruling elite, politicians and bureaucracy. This could lead to chaos in flood-affected areas, which would naturally come as victory for the militants.

People in northwestern Pakistan complained that only after flooding from swollen rivers threatened the eastern Punjab province and the southern Sindh province, did President Asif Ali Zardari return from Europe. But much more significantly, there are cynical predictions in northwestern Pakistan that the government will provide more timely and more significant assistance to the Sindh and Punjab, where the prime minister and the president are from. Concerns have also been expressed there that if international assistance is provided directly through the central government, it will only reach the Sindh and Punjab. The government of KP has stated that 95 percent of foreign aid should be directed to northwestern Pakistan, since it received the majority of damage relative to the rest of the country.

United States Government Response

The United States was quick to recognize both the scale of the disaster and that an inadequate response could lead to increased violence and militancy throughout the country, especially in the volatile northwest. Washington's assistance to the Pakistani government includes financial aid, the immediate shipment of urgently needed supplies, and logistical support from the U.S. military, international and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). As of early August, the U.S. has committed $76 million in assistance to flood-affected populations, working through Pakistan's National Disaster Management Authority and provincial disaster management authorities. It is also

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channeling funds through international and local NGOs to provide food, health care and shelter for those displaced by the floods. This is being supplemented by existing U.S.-supported assistance programs to many of the same people previously displaced by fighting. The U.S. will also be utilizing funds designated for development aid for recovery assistance.

Natural Disasters Are Also Social Phenomena

Extreme weather events, such as the flooding in Pakistan, can have an even more negative effect as a result of governance and development shortcomings within a country. In addition, the risks and vulnerabilities that people face during natural disasters are often magnified as much by their social situations as their physical conditions. Power relations, social networks, knowledge and skills, health, wealth, location and type of residence and source of income all affect risk and vulnerability, and the capacities to respond to and recover from them. Poverty leaves people extremely vulnerable during and after disasters. According to a recent study on poverty measurements from Oxford University, more than 50 percent of households in Pakistan live in poverty. This percentage is even higher for northwestern Pakistan, although official figures are not available.

The poor are more likely to live in geographical areas that face greater risk of natural disasters. They are more likely to live in structures that are unsafe and insecure, since they are more likely to lack land and property rights. The poor are less likely to have access to communication technologies that provide disaster warning, disaster relief and recovery information. The poor are less likely to have the means—such as access to cash or credit, or transportation—to leave the scene of a disaster before or after it strikes. Finally, they are less likely to have someplace to go for shelter, since social networks are usually constituted by people whose circumstances are similar.

Northwestern Pakistan is perhaps the most politically, economically and socially marginalized region of the country. The causes are primarily historical, but the result is a population that has experienced long-term marginalization and deep-seated alienation within the larger Pakistani polity, economy, and society. This is one primary reason why this population has been vulnerable to recruitment by violent religious extremists. The activities of militants in the region have further contributed to its political, economic and social marginalization.

Natural Disasters and Peacebuilding

Natural disasters bring destruction in their wakes, but they also can bring opportunities for positive change. They can affect conflict dynamics in uncertain ways. For example, a disaster can convince one or more parties of a violent conflict to seek peaceful solutions. Governmental and/or international responses to natural disasters can also build public support, or unintentionally reinforce the sources of violent conflict or militancy. One local resident said, "If the established structures of government are unable to perform, militants are waiting in the wings to prove their worth as the legitimate servants of the people. Poverty and social injustice has already been one of the important instruments of militant recruitment."

The Pakistani government and international community's responses to the flooding disaster and recovery efforts are being watched closely across the country. It would therefore be a mistake for either to be seen as providing much more assistance to the Punjab and the Sindh than to northwestern Pakistan. Many in the northwest already fault the government for its slow and inadequate response. On the other hand, if the government and the international community are willing and able to respond rapidly and appropriately, they have an opportunity to counter the causes of militancy. It is an unprecedented moment to demonstrate genuine concerns for the people of the region.

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About This Brief

This brief is a result of interviews conducted by Altaf Ullah Khan, professor of Journalism and Mass Communications at Peshawar University and USIP consultant, in Peshawar from July 28 to August 13 about conditions and emergency operations in northwestern Pakistan. Mary Hope Schwoebel is a senior program officer at USIP who leads a cross-border dialogue initiative in the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Unfortunately, disaster management priorities are often focused on immediate visible results rather than the less tangible and long-term goals of stable peace, good governance, and sustainable development. Saving lives is undoubtedly essential. At the same time, how disasters are managed can have a long-term impact on the conflict context. Disaster managers must ensure that short-term interventions also carry positive long-term impacts on societies that have already experienced considerable suffering.

Recommendations

The short- to mid-term period during which villages, cities, and nations respond and seek to recover from disasters can have long-term impacts and can affect peoples' lives well into the future. In contexts in which political, economic and social marginalization is one of the main causes of violent conflict or militancy, failing to consider the possible impacts of a flawed response to natural disaster would be unconscionable.

The challenge is to save lives and address the deep-rooted causes of violence. Disaster managers can and should assess the potential and actual conflict-related impact of their interventions. This involves asking questions about each and every policy, program, and project: Does this intervention increase or decrease the causes of conflict? Does it strengthen or undermine existing peace capacities? Does it increase or decrease the vulnerabilities of marginalized groups? Does it increase or decrease the capacities of marginalized groups? These questions should be asked by all interveners: donors, governments, international and local NGOs.

Some will see the support of the Pakistani government and the international community for disaster response and recovery as related more to the fight against extremist groups in the region than to the needs of the people involved. Perceptions are important, so it is important that governments are aware of how they are viewed and ensure that they are communicating their intentions with transparency and accountability.

Highly participatory processes of disaster management assessment, planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation will go a long way in building trust between disaster managers and the people they are serving. Participatory processes are more challenging in conflict contexts, but they are possible – they simply require a greater degree of resourcefulness on the part of disaster managers. To the extent possible, aid should be provided through a wide variety of channels – the national government, local administration, international and local NGOs – and that systems should put in place to ensure transparency and accountability in relief and recovery assistance.

The disaster also offers an opportunity to strengthen development and governance goals in Pakistan. One of the militants' highest priorities has been to weaken traditional leaders. Assistance for democracy and governance has, among other goals, sought to re-empower traditional leaders in local governance and conflict resolution. Giving traditional leaders a role in relief and recovery efforts in their communities would be an important contribution to re-empower them. Doing so will furthermore counterbalance the efforts of the militants.

Northwestern Pakistan is not the only region of the country plagued by militancy. It has, however, been the region that has been the focus of military efforts against militancy over the past decade. The current humanitarian crisis presents a challenge for all interested in the peace and democracy in northwestern Pakistan to help its people in their hour of greatest need.

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