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## FLOODS IN PAKISTAN: NEED TO REDEFINE NATIONAL PRIORITIES

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Beyond the prolonged political chaos and severe economic crisis, Pakistan is currently facing an acute humanitarian challenge and unprecedented devastation due to heavy rains, floods, and landslides. More than 1,300 people have died and approximately 30 million have been affected due to this climatic disaster.<sup>1</sup>

## **A Submerged Nation**

The unabated monsoon rains since mid-June this year and the consequent widespread flooding have led to extensive damage to public infrastructure and private property. Although all the provinces have been severely hit, maximum destruction has been caused in Sindh, where 306 people have lost their lives, and in Balochistan, where 204 people are feared dead. As per the estimates of the Pakistan National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), more than 3,000 kilometres of road, approximately 130 bridges, and 4,95,000 private structures have been badly damaged, thus leading the government to declare a 'national emergency'.<sup>2</sup> Many areas in Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) have been cut off due to the breakdown of lines of communication, while the operations of Pakistan Railways and Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) have also been severely disrupted. More than one-fifth of the country is submerged in water, and extensive damage to crops and livestock has also been reported.

The primary reason contributing to this natural disaster is the unrelenting torrential rains received this year. Till now, Pakistan has experienced 375.4 mm of rainfall, which is approximately 2.87 times higher than the thirty-year national average of 130.8 mm. The province of Balochistan has received five times its average rainfall while, Sindh has received rainfall in excess of 5.7 times the annual average.<sup>3</sup> Additional discharge in the Indus river due to the abundance of water flow in its tributaries such as Swat and Kabul has led to the flooding of low-lying downstream areas. In the ecologically fragile areas of Gilgit-Baltistan, the melting of glaciers has been the causative factor for frequent landslides and flash floods. Water levels in most of the dams across Pakistan, including the Taunsa Barrage and Sukkur Barrage on the Indus river, have risen dangerously, and many dams have also suffered damage to their embankments.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from the climatic factors, other reasons such as poor infrastructure, inadequate response mechanisms and lack of urban planning in big cities like Karachi and Quetta have also aggravated the disaster. As per many observers, this calamity is even more damaging than the cataclysmic floods of 2010-11.

## Relief and Assistance

The colossal magnitude of this national tragedy is severely testing the meagre capacities of an economically weak and cash-strapped Pakistan. Since generating the requisite funds for the rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts is beyond its national capabilities, Pakistan is relying heavily on international aid and generous contributions from its expatriates and civil society.

More than US\$ 500 million worth of assistance has already been promised by various international aid organisations and financial institutions. Humanitarian agencies under the United Nations (UN) have provided approximately US\$ 7 million in response to the floods, while the UN has also launched a US\$ 160 million 'Flash Appeal' for assistance.<sup>5</sup>

China is providing critical humanitarian supplies while the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has urged all member states to come forward with emergency assistance to mitigate the loss of life and property.<sup>6</sup> UK will provide up to £1.5 million for the relief effort, while similar assistance has been promised by many countries, including the USA and Turkey.<sup>7</sup>

The armed forces of Pakistan are at the forefront of rescue and relief operations across the nation, and a large number of troops and resources have been mobilised to the affected areas.<sup>8</sup> The relief operations also provide the Pakistan Army with a timely opportunity to contain some of the recent backlashes against the institution in public.

Many socio-religious charities and front organisations have also mobilised their cadres as they had done during the 2010 floods and other national disasters. However, the state will have to guard against the use of relief efforts by fundamentalist organisations to increase their influence among the poor and other affected sections of society.

## Climate Change – An Existential Crisis

Located in one of the most fragile and hazard-prone geographical regions, Pakistan is considered the eighth most susceptible nation to climate change.<sup>9</sup> It has the highest number (7,253) of glaciers in the world outside the arctic belt, making it acutely vulnerable to flooding driven by glacier melt due to climate change.<sup>10</sup> Rapid population growth, unplanned development, and unregulated infrastructure projects further aggravate climate-induced changes.

The effects of global climate change in Pakistan are already evident in the form of increasingly erratic weather patterns, scarcity of water and the growing frequency of natural disasters like droughts and flooding. It is therefore not surprising that after being in the midst of a severe heat

wave and drought this year, much of Pakistan got flooded months later due to extreme rains.<sup>11</sup> It must also be noted that April 2022 was the hottest month in the last sixty years, and more than seventy people reportedly died due to the unbearable heat. Rapid deforestation in the catchment areas of major rivers like the Indus and Kabul is also one of the main reasons for these floods. These catastrophic climatic changes and the resultant devastation they bring must therefore be considered the primary threat to Pakistan's development and its social and economic stability.

### **National Security- Skewed Priorities**

Pakistan has always projected India as an existential threat, and its armed forces have exploited the perceived Indian hegemonic designs to monopolise Pakistan's national resources and structures. Consequently, Pakistan has invested heavily in building a nuclear arsenal and acquiring military capacity but hasn't focused on tackling other significant security challenges like climate security.

Although Pakistan's 'National Security Policy' refers to the need for climate resilience and water security, it does not fully acknowledge the impact of climate change and hasn't recommended any long-term measures for building institutional capacities for dealing with these vital non-traditional security threats.<sup>12</sup>

However, some initiatives have lately been undertaken by Pakistan to combat climate change. In 2012, Pakistan drafted a National Climate Change Policy (NCCP), and in 2015 it approved its National Forest Policy (NFP) which aims to provide adaptation and mitigation measures.<sup>13</sup> Although the 'Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme', and other projects such as the 'Clean Green Pakistan Movement', 'Protected Areas and National Park Initiatives' etc. have attained some success, they would need a more cohesive and integrated approach to combat the impact of climate change. For instance, the Indus basin, which is the lifeline of the agriculture sector, is showing signs of natural stress. Pakistan needs to develop a comprehensive flood prevention and water management system to tackle any future crisis. On the contrary, its security establishment, even in this aspect, has carefully woven an anti-India narrative and frequently blames India for the water war and damaging Pakistan's economy. Similarly, the unbridled infrastructure development in Gilgit Baltistan, largely driven by security concerns of the Pakistan Army, has unsettled the fragile ecology of the mountainous region, which frequently results in natural emergencies like flash floods and landslides.

Pakistan should treat climate disasters like the current one as a primary national security challenge and become earnest about tackling climate change. It has created institutional structures



like the NDMA at the federal level and the Provincial Disaster Management Authorities (PDMAs) at the provincial level, but it needs to further invest in investing in mitigation efforts and prioritise disaster preparedness.

The impact of climate change is being felt globally and is of particular concern in South Asia. Regional collaborative measures are therefore required to fully mitigate and tackle the challenges emanating from climate change. Pakistan must redefine its national priorities and shed its traditional notions of perpetual enmity with its neighbours, especially India, in order to coordinate optimal responses for the mitigation of such natural disasters in the future.

## NOTES:

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