

## HEALTH CRISIS ARISING OUT OF FLOODS IN PAKISTAN

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



### **Current Situation**

Pakistan has long been considered one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change in the world. While Pakistan is one of the lowest contributors to climate change, it is one of the most impacted countries in the world. For the past 20 years, Pakistan has consistently been on the list of the top 10 countries most vulnerable to climate change. Despite a history of intense floods, the country was ill-prepared for this year's monsoon season. Intractable political and economic crises have hampered Pakistan's capacity to address the ongoing fallout, particularly the worsening humanitarian crisis. The current flooding has caused over \$10 billion in damages, with the full extent of damage is yet to be ascertained as the crisis is ongoing.<sup>1</sup>

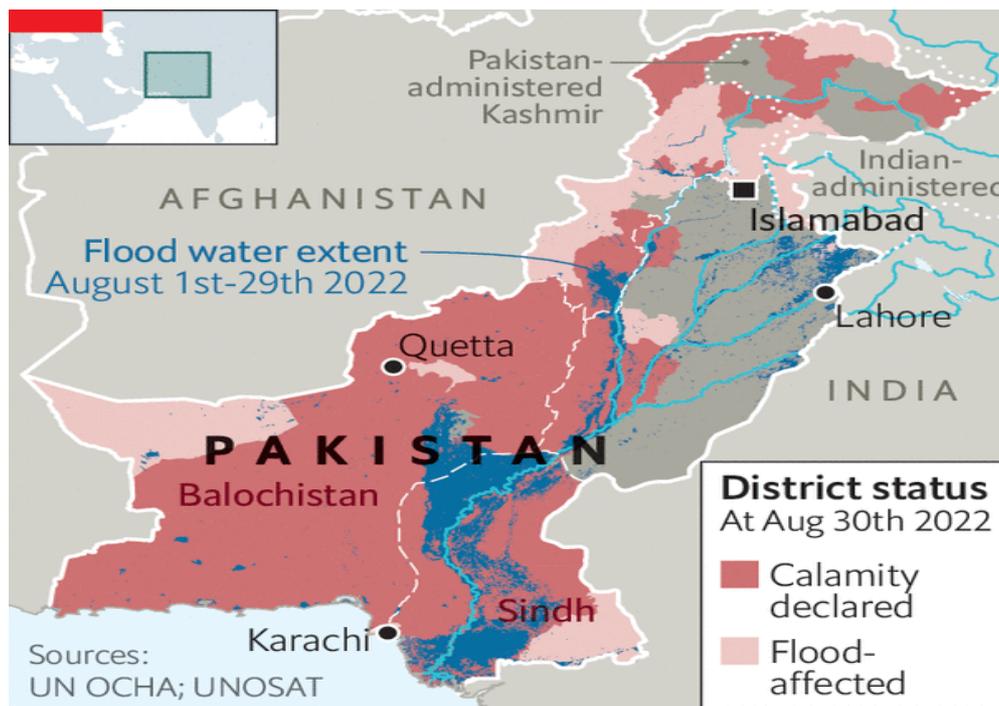
Extensive rains, which have pummelled Pakistan since June, have inundated the country, putting a third of it under water. More than 33 million people have been affected by the flooding, brought on by record monsoon rains amplified by climate change. One in seven Pakistanis has been affected, more than 1,350 people have died, with many sleeping under open skies, without shelter. About 900,000 livestock animals have been lost, and more than 2 million acres of farmland and 90 percent

<sup>1</sup> Tamanna Salikuddin, Jumaina Siddiqui, "Pakistan's Deadly Floods Come Amid Deluge of Crises," USIP, September 1, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/pakistans-deadly-floods-come-amid-deluge-crises>

of crops have been damaged. The survivors, the majority of whom are poor, must now avoid hunger and disease lurking in the rising, foetid floodwater.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Looming Health Crisis***

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) representative in Pakistan, Palitha Mahipala, major health risks are unfolding and will continue to unfold in the months to come as more rain is forecast. There is an urgent need to scale up disease surveillance, restore damaged health facilities and ensure sufficient medicine and health supplies are obtained. The chief of WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that the “UN has classified this disaster as a grade 3 emergency.” A grade 3 emergency is the highest level of the internal grading system. The UN and Pakistan have issued a joint appeal for \$160 million in emergency funding to help the estimated 33 million people affected by the floods. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also visited Pakistan on September 9, 2022, to discuss the ongoing relief effort with officials.<sup>3</sup>



Senator Sherry Rehman, Federal Minister for Climate Change, has also stated that almost half of the country has been submerged under flood water which has stagnated in many places, lurking the risk

<sup>2</sup> Fatima Bhutto, “What Is Owed to Pakistan, Now One-Third Underwater,” *The New York Times*, September 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/03/opinion/environment/floods-in-pakistan-climate-change.html?smtyp=cur&smid=tw-nytopinion>

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Schlein, “UN: Scale, Scope of Humanitarian Crisis in Flood-Hit Pakistan Unprecedented,” *VOA*, September 2, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-scale-scope-of-humanitarian-crisis-in-flood-hit-pakistan-unprecedented-/6728823.html>

of waterborne disease. This has led to a health crisis which is a major challenge to be managed by the government. The minister also underlined that this was not monsoon rather a disaster and it was mainly due to climate change and global warming and opined that the government would have to make the issue as part of its foreign policy, green diplomacy, and global negotiations.<sup>4</sup>

The outbreak of various diseases has already begun. The situation is bleak in Sindh, KP, and Balochistan. Hundreds of thousands of flood-affected people in Pakistan have fallen ill, fighting serious diseases like diarrhoea, gastro, and malaria. Tens of thousands of children are suffering from diarrhoea. Health experts have warned that infectious and waterborne diseases which are a result of lack of hygiene and highly contaminated stagnant water could kill more people than the floods. Mortality among new-born babies and severe acute malnutrition are at risk of increasing due to disruption of services.<sup>5</sup>

The recent floods have severely damaged Pakistan's healthcare infrastructure with over 1,460 health centres damaged, of which 432 fully destroyed, mostly in Sindh. More than 4,500 medical camps have been set up by the WHO and its partners, while more than 230,000 rapid tests for acute watery diarrhoea, malaria, dengue, hepatitis, and chikungunya have been distributed. The situation is expected to worsen, as it is still difficult to get to areas hit hard by the floods. People are ill-equipped to fend off disease outbreaks in camps lacking safe water and sanitary conditions. Bridges have been destroyed and roads turned into mud, cutting off access to many people in distress.<sup>6</sup>

Shortages of health workers and limited health supplies also are disrupting health services and increasing the health risks for children and pregnant and lactating women. Women and children have been disproportionately affected by Pakistan's catastrophic floods because of the lack of access to healthcare. There are 1.2 million pregnant women among the hundreds of thousands of displaced people. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) says many of these women lack access to the healthcare facilities and support they need to deliver their children safely. The United Nations

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<sup>4</sup> News Desk, "Lurking health crisis amid stagnant floodwater major challenge: Sherry," Pakistan Observer, September 1, 2022, <https://pakobserver.net/lurking-health-crisis-amid-stagnant-floodwater-major-challenge-sherry/>

<sup>5</sup> Khalid Bhatti, "Indescribable tragedy," The News, September 5, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/988405-indescribable-tragedy>

<sup>6</sup> Amin Ahmed and Anwar Iqbal, "WHO warns of worsening situation in Pakistan," Dawn, September 7, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1708848/who-warns-of-worsening-situation-in-pakistan>

Children's Fund (UNICEF) believes more than 3 million children need humanitarian assistance and are at increased risk of waterborne diseases, drowning and malnutrition.<sup>7</sup>

People are facing many challenges in the informal settlements, camped along roadsides to escape surrounding flood waters, setting up shelters with whatever resources they have. The WHO has so far delivered \$1.5 million in medicines and emergency stockpiles, including tents, water purification kits and oral rehydration sachets. It is appealing for \$19 million from donors. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has launched an air bridge to deliver aid from Dubai. Aid includes 40,000 sleeping mats, nearly 15,000 kitchen sets and some 5,000 multi-purpose tarpaulins.<sup>8</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan is vulnerable to most natural hazards and is on the front line of the climate crisis, contending with a string of extreme weather events in recent months, from record heat waves to destructive floods. It is prone to floods, earthquakes, droughts, and cyclone storms. It is prone to famines and heavy monsoons. According to the Federal Flood Commission, Pakistan has witnessed 28 super riverine floods in its 75-year history. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) was meant to be responsible for policymaking and coordination at the national level. At the provincial level, the respective Provincial Disaster Management Authorities (PDMAs) were mandated to set up a system that would immediately spring into action in the aftermath of disasters and calamities. But these organisations have failed to deliver a timely response to the unfolding disaster.<sup>9</sup>

Faced with these multifaceted challenges in such a short period of time, humanitarian and relief agencies must act and adapt rapidly to mitigate the problems faced by the millions of people who have been impacted in recent weeks. The scale and magnitude of devastation is unprecedented and much bigger than the 2010 floods. It may take months for flood waters to recede and for rehabilitation efforts to reach the hardest hit areas, and the continued political crisis will remain a major distraction from the relief efforts. Pakistan has been marked in the top ten countries being

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<sup>7</sup> Javed Iqbal, Sameer Mandhro and Kathleen Magramo, "Fears for babies born into Pakistan's devastating floods," CNN, September 6, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/06/asia/pakistan-floods-displace-hunger-sick-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>8</sup> AFP, "UN preparing for worse to come in Pakistan floods," Geo.Tv, September 6, 2022, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/438524-un-preparing-for-worse-to-come-in-pakistan-floods>

<sup>9</sup> Mansoor Raza, "Pakistan's history of disasters and the lessons we fail to learn," Dawn, August 31, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1707390/pakistans-history-of-disasters-and-the-lessons-we-fail-to-learn>

affected by climate change, the government must take some emergency measures and develop a national adaptation plan.<sup>10</sup>

With the federal and provincial governments under the control of different political parties, there is also the risk of aid being distributed in preferential or politicised ways. Time is running out and quick and timely efforts are needed to save the flood victims from starvation and disease. Fears are growing that more people might lose their lives if authorities fail to control the spread of waterborne diseases and provide them food and shelter. A shift in paradigm is needed from a reactive to a proactive mode of disaster management to alleviate the sufferings of the community. This is the time to encourage local evidence-based practices to allow for nuanced climate action. This evidence should inform the design of climate change action policies, programs, activities, and projects to improve their effectiveness.

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<sup>10</sup> Rahul Basharat Rajput & Mohammed Nadeem Chaudhry, "Climate Crisis and Poor Government Planning Are Blamed for Pakistan Floods," Health Policy Watch, August 31, 2022, <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/climate-crisis-government-pakistan-floods/>