

Aid slows to a trickle as Pakistan crisis enters a new phase

As the floodwaters recede and Pakistan confronts a looming public health emergency, Talha Burki analyses the international aid response in our second feature on the crisis.

As the floodwater surges southwards, and Pakistan faces the likelihood of a public health emergency, the economic cost of the disaster threatens to run out of control. About a quarter of the country's harvest has been destroyed and next year's harvest is under threat. Sindh's agricultural losses are estimated at US\$1 billion. Much of the cotton crop—a crucial export—has been wiped out, and there has been massive damage to the country's infrastructure. This month, the IMF released a \$451 million emergency loan to Pakistan, which already owes its creditors some \$50 billion. But the \$460 million UN flash appeal for Pakistan—framed at a time when the catastrophe had yet to fully develop—is only two-thirds funded. It seems to fit into a general picture of underfunding for the crisis. The French Government, for example, which receives about \$62 million per year from Pakistan in debt repayment, has directly committed \$2.45 million to the UN appeal.

"The appeal never really got off the ground until the [UN] Secretary-General went out to Pakistan" Ian Talbot (University of Southampton, UK) told *The Lancet*. In the early stages of the flooding, the international community did not seem to comprehend the seriousness of the problem. After Ban Ki-moon's visit, pledges began to arrive from governments and international organisations such as the World Bank. But the past few weeks have seen things slow down. Why?

One reason is so-called donor fatigue. Last year, Pakistan called on the world to help with the 2 million refugees fleeing the military operations in Swat (an area now devastated by flooding). This year saw the hugely destructive earthquake in Haiti. Indeed, alongside

its appeal for Pakistan, the UN is running an additional 17 humanitarian appeals; none of which, incidentally, has received more than three-quarters of the requested funds.

Then there is the nature of the Pakistani disaster. "Floods are not an easy one to understand", explains

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Penny Lawrence (Oxfam, London, UK). An earthquake, for example, is intense and immediate. Cameras beam images of terrible injuries and children being pulled from wrecked buildings. "They somehow grab the attention more than floods", said Lawrence. The Haitian earthquake killed about 222 000 people, as did the Asian tsunami; this too is likely to have influenced contributions. It is more difficult to persuade people to donate towards forestalling a cholera epidemic in a country where fatalities have been relatively low; fundraisers have traditionally found it tough to drum up publicity for issues related to sanitation.

Moreover, this is an unpredictable and worsening situation, unfolding over time. It does not have the easily packaged narrative of an earthquake, in which the disaster is quickly followed by the attempted recovery. "No-one imagined that 5 weeks later people would be running from a second wave of flooding", Lawrence points out. Massive amounts of money are needed. The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), for example, has set aside more than \$100 million for its operations in Pakistan (this also covers its other long running operations in the country).

"It's the largest budget in our history for just one country", the ICRC's Jessica Barry told *The Lancet*. "I think that's a reflection of the scale of the disaster".

One of the trickiest subjects for aid organisations to negotiate is the reputation of the authorities in Pakistan. Lawrence talks of a "lack of trust" between the Pakistani Government and the international community. There are the widespread suspicions that elements of the security services are complicit in terrorist activities; a concern voiced by David Cameron during a trip to India shortly before the flooding began. South Asian specialist Marie Lall (Institute of Education, London, UK) believes this might have discouraged people from making substantial contributions. "One day you hear this country is harbouring or exporting terrorism and the next you're supposed to donate money".

A BBC investigation found that after the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, some relief money was channelled through Jamaat-ud-dawa, a charity that was later implicated in the 2008 Mumbai bombings. In early August, reports emerged that Jamaat-ud-dawa was distributing aid to victims of the flooding. "Pakistan's association with terrorism is definitely off-putting", admits Lawrence. But whereas the earthquake was centred on an area abounding in training camps and extremist strongholds, the floods are far too wide-ranging for any single group to claim credit for the relief efforts, and there are several trusted organisations now established in Pakistan to whom people can make direct contributions.

Pakistan's Government has faced criticism over its response to the crisis, although Barry points out that a disaster of this magnitude would



A family make their way through a flood-relief camp run by the Pakistan Army in Sindh province

probably be beyond the capability of any government in the world to deal with. As the floods began to sweep through northern parts of the country, President Asif Zardari declined to return from a European trip, during the course of which he visited his Normandy chateau. Zardari has been dogged by corruption allegations for much of his career. "Financial probity and transparency are an issue in Pakistan", concedes Talbot. "There are concerns over levels of corruption and government competence". Pakistan has had huge difficulty in meeting the IMF and World Bank's conditions for continued financial support, and Talbot cites a lack of transparency as a "major problem". Doubtless, this explains why the relief fund established by Pakistan's Prime Minister took a mere US \$200 000 in its first 2 weeks. "Even Pakistanis don't want to give to their own Government", affirms Lall.

There are ways around this. Pakistanis tend to give privately to local organisations running operations of varying sizes across the country. There are plenty of such outfits, Lall explains, and they can be very effective. Direct aid such as this does not show up in calculations of contributions to the relief effort. Governments are bypassing the Pakistani administration by making contributions to international and local non-governmental organisations

(NGOs), notes Talbot. "Around 80% of the money that's going into Pakistan is going through NGOs" he told *The Lancet*. One such organisation is the Edhi Foundation, a non-profit social welfare programme that runs 300 health-care centres around the country and provides ambulance services and medical aid, yet is rarely mentioned in the western press.

"All Governments need to donate more generously", stresses Lawrence. The UK public—which includes a sizeable population of people of Pakistani origin—has donated £54 million to the Disasters Emergency Committee's flood appeal, while the UK Government has donated some £42 million to the UN appeal, by far the largest contribution in the EU. Saudi Arabia has given about \$114 million worth of aid. And of course, the USA has provided Pakistan with billions of dollars over the years in military aid. The US Government has pledged \$200 million to the relief effort, some of which has been diverted from the military aid budget. But private donations in the country have been lacklustre. "Pakistan hasn't had the attention Haiti had", said Lawrence.

Unlike Haiti, Pakistan is thousands of miles from the USA, and there are not many Pakistanis in the country. International figures who usually spearhead fundraising drives might

feel alienated from Pakistan after years of troubled dealings over the war in Afghanistan. In a report published online, the University of Michigan's Juan Cole suggested that discernible "Islamophobia" in the acrimonious dispute over the planned Islamic Centre two blocks from Ground Zero "left Americans far less willing to donate to Muslim disaster victims". The American media simply has not paid the catastrophe the attention it warrants, he adds, which has had a knock-on effect on fundraising.

Regardless, unless donation efforts are stepped-up, the outlook for Pakistan is bleak. "We're very worried the situation is going to deteriorate", reveals Lawrence. The refugee camps in which the displaced people are situated are highly vulnerable to outbreaks of disease. "People are living very close together without access to clean water", said Lawrence. Moreover, those in the camps have usually arrived from rural areas in which public health messages about the importance of good hygiene are not widely disseminated. This might not matter so much in sparsely populated and scattered villages, but it does when people are living in close quarters. Lall adds that the camps are an ideal recruiting ground for fundamentalist organisations.

Even if an acute public health disaster is avoided, Pakistan's medium-term prospects are troubling. When the floods hit, Pakistan was in the midst of a financial crisis. Recovery from a natural disaster of this size will be costly. Talbot reckons that Pakistan's economic growth will slow to about 2.5% for the next financial year, just enough to accommodate the increase in the labour supply. "Pakistan already has low human development indicators after years of drastic underinvestment in health and education", he told *The Lancet*. "Now there'll be much less money to spend in those areas".

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