

# What Pakistan did right

BY C. CHRISTINE FAIR

Tuesday, January 18, 2011

The floods in [Pakistan in 2010](#) were massive. The rains affected the length of Pakistan, maximally impacting the provinces of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Punjab, and Sindh as well as parts of Baluchistan. Flooding displaced more than 20 million people and covered about one fifth of Pakistan's arable lands -- an area roughly equal to the U.S. eastern seaboard. [This flood affected more people than](#) the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, Hurricane Katrina (2005), Hurricane Nargis (2005), the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake combined. Irrigation systems were destroyed, crops ruined, and seed stockpiles devastated. More than six million heads of livestock (including poultry) were killed. Yet, amazingly, only 1,985 people perished while another 2,946 were injured.

Given the population density of the affected regions, the poor infrastructure, and the baseline level of poverty, these figures are astonishingly low. In spite of the physical destruction, the fact that fewer than 2,000 Pakistanis died suggests that the Pakistani government did something very well last summer. Amidst numerous ongoing internal security crisis, political challenges and shortfalls of international assistance, Pakistani agencies continue to manage this crisis well despite the serious challenges that remain.



## The science of flooding

Arguably, the [Pakistan Meteorological Department](#) (PMD) is one of the most important reasons why the floods claimed relatively fewer lives than may have been expected, given the scale of the event. In January, I met with the Director General [Arif Mahmood and his team](#) in Islamabad. They walked me through, in painstakingly scientific detail, how their organization saved lives in 2010, as they had done before and as they will continue to do in the future.

One of the PMD's jobs is flood forecasting. In the middle of July, the PMD began tracking a storm brewing in the Bay of Bengal. This eastern weather system developed interactively with a western weather system to produce the massive rains and the subsequent [super flood of 2010](#).

On July 24, the PMD issued a flood warning to the provincial government of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). Despite these increasingly severe warnings, KPK's citizenry did not believe them. Like victims of

Hurricane Katrina and other brewing natural disasters, the residents in KPK in the waters' path did not leave their homes for safety. The inhabitants of KPK had no experience in their lifetimes that led them to believe that a flood on such a scale was possible. This is the most likely reason why the vast majority of the flood's 1,985 victims perished in the earliest days of the flood in KPK.

The PMD scientists knew what the residents did not: that Pakistan's rainfall patterns have been changing. The PMD has been collecting monsoon data for decades. Its scientists have had long documented a disturbing and likely long-term shift in Pakistan's monsoon rains: namely, that in recent years there has been a slow but steady change in the location where Pakistan's major rainfalls concentrate. In the past, monsoon rains fell most intensely over the Punjab. Slowly and steadily, the concentration of rainfall has moved north and west to KPK. This redistribution of concentrated rainfall away from the Punjab and towards KPK explains why no one in KPK had any reason to believe the predicted weather.

The PMD kept issuing warnings to KPK as the rains began to fall. However, as fate would have it, on July 28, Pakistan experienced its worst aviation disaster to date. Amidst poor visibility due the brewing storms, a passenger jet coming to Islamabad from Karachi crashed into the Margalla Hills. All 152 people on board were killed. Pakistan's media was consumed with the news. Helicopters made continuous flights up and down the hills in dense fog that made the sorties difficult and dangerous. With the media beset upon this tragic spectacle, the PMD's warnings went unheeded as the rain began to fall.

While many of the early victims could have been saved had they any inkling of the possibilities of this new kind of monsoon, the PMD's continued actions no doubt saved countless lives as the Indus bulged and swelled and cut a path of destruction as it rushed southward. On July 31, the PMD issued another warning for Sindh that provided nearly two weeks alert to move populations and prepare for the coming floods. Having seen the devastation of KPK, no one doubted these warnings.

Not only is the role of the PMD in this crisis not well appreciated, the organization's principal finding about changes in the distribution of rainfall in Pakistan is not appreciated by Pakistan's public or leadership. PMD scientists explained to me that they do not believe that this was an isolated or fluke event; rather, they suspect that this may be related to global warming and thus a permanent change. If they are correct, rainfall will increasingly be centered in KPK.

This suggests that Pakistan's current dam and flow infrastructure will be inadequate for these new precipitation patterns. During our meeting, the scientists expressed their beliefs that Pakistan will need a large reservoir upstream from the current reservoir at Tarbela to protect KPK and another downstream to protect the other three provinces. Unfortunately, while the PMD is under the Ministry of Defense, it does not have a voice in policy. Given that Pakistan's institutions are notorious for failing to generate proactive policies, the PMD's concerns about Pakistan's infrastructure are not a part of any proactive strategy for managing Pakistan's future rain patterns. Such plans would come under Pakistan's Water Resource and Power Development Agency.

## Six months later

Some six months have passed since the onset of the floods. Surprisingly, many of the predicted disasters did not happen. Pakistan did not have the predicted second wave of deaths in the camps for the millions of internally displaced persons. Astonishingly, none of the predicted epidemics (such as cholera) took place. Pakistan has even managed to stave off the expected food insecurity.

Pakistan's National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA), headed by Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Nadeem Ahmed is part of the reason these catastrophes were prevented. The NDMA, along with the four Provincial Disaster Management Agencies, coordinated the massive effort to rescue flood victims, establish camps for internally displaced people, provide the victims with shelter, water and sanitation facilities, food and other logistical requirements. The NDMA coordinates with international donors and maintains a situation room where staff track calls and resolve problems. In a country that routinely sustains criticism for organizations that underperform, NDMA excels.

Some of the worst fears about lost crops have not materialized. While many of Pakistan's fields have not been properly prepared for planting this year, NDMA working with its domestic and international partners was able to provide seeds to many cultivators. In many cases, they simply flung the seed into the land once the water receded. Many of these efforts are resulting in bumper crops. This was not expected in September of 2010. To be sure, this is only the beginning and much more needs to be done. But measures of this type helped stave off some of the gravest outcomes expected.

Despite the gravity of the floods, most of the IDPs have returned, according to the NDMA. Nonetheless, nearly 160,000 of the original 3 million remain in camps. In Sindh there are 130,717 IDPs; in Baluchistan 28,346 and 500 in KPK. However, Maj. Gen (R) Ahmad concedes that many of the homes to which they returned are temporary.

## Challenges remain

There are still challenges. Complaints persist about corruption with the pre-paid ATM cards (Watan cards) distributed to IDPs. In Sindh, serious charges of corruption persist regarding the purchase of tents, blankets, medicines and food for the flood-affected people. Reports continue that food supplies are languishing in depots while IDPs go without in Sindh. Indeed, the IDP camp I visited in near the office of the District Coordination Officer for Dadu, was saddening. The residents and the camp administrator claimed that there had been no food distributed in a month.

There are still some 247 IDPs camps: 202 in Sindh, one in KPK, and 44 in Baluchistan. They all need supplies -- warmer tents, clothes, and so on -- to prepare for what is shaping up to be an unusually cold winter. Apart from helping the remaining IDPs return home, Pakistan needs help rebuilding the homes and infrastructure that has been lost. Many of the refugees returned to temporary housing. Many of the bridges that were put in were temporary. Rail service has been restored to some degree but more needs to be done. In short, Pakistan needs to commence the long haul of long-term reconstruction and it needs help to do so.

## Moving forward

While Pakistan has been grateful for the assistance that it has received, the international community has been lethargic about helping Pakistanis in this moment of need. Many members of the Western media seem only to care about the flood if it can be tied to a story about militancy, government collapse, corruption, or military might. Nor has the international media focused upon the serious things that Pakistan has gotten right despite all of the challenges that it faces.

It is absolutely true that Pakistan shares much of the blame for its woeful fiscal and infrastructural state. Since the state's inception, Pakistan's elites have refused to tax their large agricultural or industrial earnings. The military has always enjoyed the lion's share of the budget with the remaining budget spent in ways with no accountability to Pakistan's citizenry.

American Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#) was right to point out that Pakistan's elites are doing too little to pay their way while the international community helps Pakistan's victims. Since the onset of the crisis, the international community has [pledged more than \\$3 billion](#). The United States has pledged the most with \$571 million, followed closely by Japan with \$520 million. In contrast, China and Saudi Arabia -- the countries that Pakistanis tend to view as their unstinting friends -- have donated a meager \$220 million and \$100 million respectively.

Even Pakistani analysts are concerned about Pakistan's aid dependency and refusal to expand its tax net. As one recent [article](#) noted, agriculture accounts for about one-fifth of Pakistan's \$17 billion Pakistan GDP. That sector also employs 45 percent of country's labor force. Taxing agriculture (as well as industrial) revenue would help Pakistan raise the funds it badly needs from its own population. But there are political reasons why it has escaped the net. However, former finance minister, [Salman Shah](#), explains there is a reason why Pakistan has never imposed such taxes: "Of course agriculture is the vote bank and most parliamentarians are from a rural background and so they try and keep outside the tax net to a large extent."

Nonetheless, half a year after the floods devastated the country and after most of the media has left the story behind, 20 million Pakistanis still need help -- and they need help now. While Pakistan must expand its own tax net to contribute to the long-term costs of rebuilding its infrastructure and preparing for future disasters, the international community should also continue to support immediate needs such as winterization, food support and rehabilitation of the flood victims.

***[Christine Fair](#)** is an assistant professor at Georgetown University and the author of *Cuisines of the Axis of Evil and Other Irritating States*.*

RIZWAN TABASSUM/AFP/Getty Images