

Swamped, bruised and resentful

Terrifying monsoon floods add to a sea of other woes in Pakistan—and intensify pressure on the president.



PRESIDENT ASIF ZARDARI may yet regret sticking to a European jaunt this week, just as his countrymen struggled to cope with the worst flooding in Pakistan's history. As the heaviest monsoon rain in decades swept away the houses of over 140,000 people, killing an estimated 1,500 and affecting over 3m, Mr Zardari was pictured swanning about in sunny France, taking a helicopter trip to his 16th-century chateau in Normandy, and promoting the fledgling political career of his son. In the process he took time to admonish Britain's new government for daring to point out that elements in Pakistan export terrorism and to scold the West for losing "hearts and minds" in its war in Afghanistan.

Back home, the Pakistani government is fast losing the hearts and minds of many of its own people. In places anger is intense over an inadequate response to the disaster. Neighbours and relief charities, including some with links to Islamic extremists, appear to be doing a better job of helping victims than the national authorities, at least in some blighted areas.

The worst of the flooding, which began late last week, is in the North-West Frontier Province (newly named Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), including the Swat valley, the region that has suffered most from terrorism and the domestic Taliban insurgency. Last year some 2m people were displaced from Swat as a military offensive drove the Pakistani Taliban out of the scenic valley.

Although the scale of the flooding and needs of the victims would have overwhelmed any government, the provincial and national authorities have largely been in a state of paralysis. The prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gilani, who had previously been almost absent, urged his ministers on August 4th to speed up relief efforts. Some 50,000 troops have been deployed, and thousands of stranded people plucked by army helicopters from their rooftops. But the normally well-organised armed forces have not managed to do much beyond rescue and evacuation.

Roads, bridges, electricity and irrigation canals have been ripped away. People reported how, by the time they managed to gather their children, flood water was already waist high, or worse. The United Nations says that 1.8m are in urgent need of water, food and shelter. As ever after such events, an outbreak of waterborne diseases such as cholera is feared. The torrent headed south, following the course of the Indus river, wrecking lives and infrastructure in the heart of Pakistan, Punjab province, and, by-mid week, in Sindh.

"We never imagined that this could happen. We were not prepared for such a big disaster," confesses Kamran Rehman Khan, a senior official in Charsadda, one of the districts of the north-west that has suffered most. At one construction on a river in Charsadda, built by the British colonial government, more than twice the volume of water of the previous record flood, in 1929, gushed in, snapping off its gates. Mr Khan says that the effect has not only been to wipe out this year's crops, but because of damage to the irrigation network, next season's crops will be lost too. The areas worst hit, including Charsadda and the neighbouring district of Nowshera, as well as Punjab, are all big food producers.

Into the void have stepped aid organisations, local and international, as well as Islamic charities, some of which are hardliners. Among the religious outfits active in flood relief is Jamaat-ud-Dawa, a supposedly banned group linked to the horrific November 2008 terrorist attack on civilian targets in Mumbai, India's commercial capital.



Such groups may now gain in popularity at the expense of the national government, led by the secular Pakistan Peoples Party, and the provincial government of North-West Frontier, run by the Awami National Party, which is also secular. Pakistanis have not been inclined to back religious groups in elections that were held fairly, but the generally hapless and lofty rule of the two secular forces since they came to power early in 2008 is worrying.

The deluge, which was many times the usual monsoon and fell farther north and west than usual, has exposed the lack of investment in water infrastructure, including big dams, much of which was built in the 1960s. The removal of forest cover may also have allowed rainwater to drain faster into the rivers.

Pakistan is lurching from crisis to crisis, with an anaemic economy, religious extremism and an uncertain political dispensation. On August 4th a suicide bomber killed a senior police commander in Peshawar. Earlier in the week a leading politician was shot dead in Karachi, ever an ethnic tinderbox, igniting a frenzy of tit-for-tat killings that left over 70 dead and all but shut the commercial capital. Mr Zardari's attention is needed back home.

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