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Pakistan's 2022 Floods and Implications for U.S. Interests

Overview

The summer 2022 floods in Pakistan created a humanitarian crisis and raised environmental and governance issues with implications for U.S. interests. In mid-June, at the beginning of monsoon season, heavy rains flooded areas of Pakistan. Estimates range from double to several times the normal monsoon rainfall. By late August, flooding had worsened to historic and catastrophic levels, reportedly affecting more than 33 million people, injuring nearly 13,000 and killing more than 1,700. More than one-third of the country was reportedly submerged at the height of the rainfall, negatively affecting housing, infrastructure, and livelihoods and creating extensive agricultural losses. In early October, floodwaters began to recede. Pakistan's government has estimated the cost of flood damage at \$30 billion and cut its projected annual economic growth for its fiscal year ending June 2023. Islamabad reportedly will pursue the rescheduling of about \$27 billion in external debt largely owed to China, and may seek to suspend international debt repayments. Winter could also pose further challenges for millions of flood-affected people.

Successive U.S. Administrations have described a stable, democratic, and prosperous Pakistan as critical to U.S. interests. Responding to this disaster is taxing a Pakistani government already struggling with political upheaval, worsening economic and debt crises, unsettled civil-military relations, and rising public discontent. Regional stability and efforts to counter militancy and terrorism are among U.S. concerns; both may face negative impacts from the current situation. For example, following 2010 flooding, some banned Pakistani terrorist groups reportedly were at the forefront of rural relief efforts and may gain popular support through such activities; Pakistan's government denies any banned groups are involved in flood relief in 2022. Congress may consider whether or not U.S. assistance in response to the floods would serve U.S. interests, including economic and security objectives.

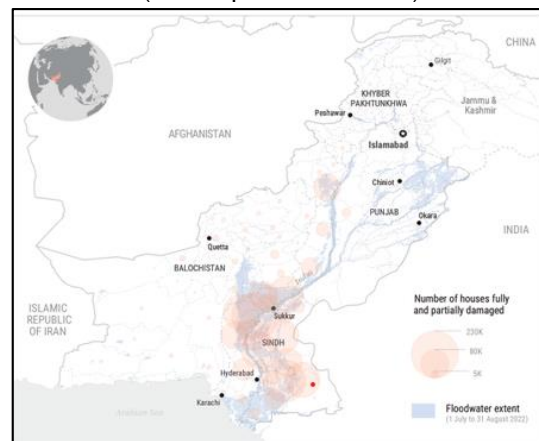
Flood Damage—Initial Assessments

Pakistan's National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) is the lead federal agency for disaster relief coordination, including relief operations supported by Pakistan's army, navy, and air force. The provinces of Sindh and Balochistan appear most affected (see **Figure 1**). As of October 28, 2022, the NDMA is reporting the following damage due to flooding since June 14, 2022:

- 1,735 killed (46% Sindh, 19% Balochistan, 18% Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or KP, 13% Punjab) and 12,867 injured;
- Affected population: more than 33 million (44% Sindh, 28% Balochistan, 15% Punjab, 13% KP);

- Livestock deaths: more than 1.1 million (43+% Balochistan, 37% Sindh, 18% Punjab);
- Damaged homes: more than 2.2 million (82% Sindh);
- Damaged roads: more than 8,100 miles (64% Sindh); damaged bridges: 439 (38% Sindh, 24% KP).

Figure 1. Homes Damaged in Pakistan's 2022 Flooding
(as of September 15, 2022)



Source: U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Humanitarian Needs

Pakistan's affected populations need relief supplies, including shelter, food, and water, sanitation, hygiene (WASH) and winterization assistance. Floods have exacerbated food insecurity across the country. The United Nations (U.N.) estimates that 7.9 million people have been displaced, with nearly 600,000 living in relief sites. The United Nations also reports that, of those displaced, many are staying as close to their homes and the affected areas as possible due to concerns that lack of land ownership documentation could prevent future returns. Pakistan hosts roughly 800,000 Afghan refugees some of whom also have been affected. In many areas, damaged roads and bridges hampered the humanitarian response. Even as floodwaters recede, the risk remains of vector-borne disease (such as malaria) and water-borne disease (including diarrhea and cholera) as well as threats from venomous wildlife such as poisonous snakes. With vaccine campaigns suspended and access to care limited, maintaining maternal health and protection from gender-based violence, and addressing outbreaks of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and other medical conditions are a priority.

National and International Responses

Government of Pakistan. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif established a National Flood Response and Coordination Center to facilitate a multiagency response in coordination with the NDMA as well as relief sites for the displaced.

Pakistan is providing cash assistance to those affected, while provincial governments may redirect development funds to flood relief. Islamabad also has verified several fund-raising agencies on the GoFundMe website.

International Responses. In October 2022, the United Nations issued a revised Humanitarian Appeal for \$816 million to support an Islamabad-led flood response through May 2023. The Appeal identified 9.5 million people in particularly urgent need of humanitarian assistance in the 34 most affected districts in Balochistan, Sindh, KP, and Punjab. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees launched an appeal for \$65.8 million focused on flood-affected Afghan refugees and host communities in four districts: Peshawar, Quetta, Nowshera, and Karachi. Other international relief agencies have also launched funding appeals. The U.N. Secretary-General called for “massive” international support. Other organizations are promoting “climate justice,” arguing for recognition of climate change’s role in this disaster and the burden on Pakistan. Humanitarian efforts also aim to provide early recovery programming, as populations require less life-saving assistance and need more resilience activities. International financial institutions have pledged funds for Pakistan disaster relief and development, with the majority coming from the World Bank.

U.S. Response to Pakistan’s Floods

In August 2022, the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan issued a disaster declaration. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has since established teams to assess the impact of the floods and to coordinate the U.S. government flood response in Islamabad and Washington, DC, respectively. As of October 27, for FYs 2022–2023, the U.S. government had provided \$83.5 million in humanitarian assistance. (Earlier in FY2022, USAID also provided \$3 million in Early Recovery, Risk Reduction, and Resilience funding.) During September, the Pentagon’s Central Command flew USAID relief supplies from USAID’s Dubai warehouse to Pakistan to support USAID-led humanitarian response operations. Bilateral U.S. development aid to Pakistan—estimated at \$71 million for FY2022, with \$84 million requested for FY2023—is expected to continue, including over \$1 million in grants and project support provided in August, and with programs adapting, in part, to address the long-term impact of the 2022 floods. In late September, the United States suspended service payments on \$132 million of Pakistan’s debt.

Environmental and Governance Issues

Pakistan suffers from environmental and governance challenges that potentially worsen natural disasters, including flooding. A World Bank *Vulnerability Assessment* found that “Pakistan faces some of the highest disaster risk levels in the world.” In mid-2010, the country experienced the most catastrophic flooding in its history until then, a disaster that officially killed more than 1,700 persons, affected more than 20% of the land area and 20 million people, and caused billions of dollars in damage. According to a *Scientific American* assessment later that year, the scale of that flooding was “made worse by a history of deforestation and land-use changes in the affected areas.” Analysts estimate that Pakistan’s tree cover has

decreased by at least 80% since its 1947 independence. The annual rate of forest loss in Pakistan in the last three decades is one of the highest in Asia, according data compiled by the Food and Agriculture Organization.

Poor governance and planning, and lack of political will, also might contribute to Pakistan’s vulnerability to floods. Inadequate water management likely played a role. Following the 2010 floods, the government reportedly failed to implement plans that would have reduced the consequences of future floods by preventing rebuilding in and repopulating of flood-prone areas. Laws barring construction too close to river banks apparently were widely violated. Current political divisions in Pakistan may complicate federal-provincial coordination.

In his September address to the U.N. General Assembly, President Joe Biden singled out Pakistan’s disaster as an example of the “human cost of climate change.” The U.N. Secretary-General and Pakistan’s prime minister are among those positing a causal link between climate change and recent flooding. A rapid, non-peer-reviewed September “attribution” study suggested “climate change could have increased the rainfall intensity” in Pakistan in 2022, among several factors that experts identify as contributing to the event. Some analyses see Pakistan as especially vulnerable to climate-related extreme weather events. Yale University’s *2022 Environmental Performance Index* gave Pakistan an overall ranking of 176th of 180 countries, including 175th in “climate change mitigation” (mainly reduction of greenhouse gas emissions). A June 2022 U.N. report projects that, in a “worst-case climate change scenario,” Pakistan could realize average annual economic losses equal to more than 9% of its GDP. Going forward, Pakistan may join other developing nations in pushing to establish international funding for recovery from natural disasters that they say are caused by climate change.

Issues for Congress

For over a decade, Congress annually has enacted security- and human rights-related conditions on bilateral aid to Pakistan. Congress may consider whether and if so, how to address the crisis in Pakistan through humanitarian or more strategic long-term assistance amid unprecedented global humanitarian need and competing priorities. Congress could consider whether the United States should provide humanitarian assistance through multilateral channels such as the United Nations or nongovernmental implementing partners, and monitor how the executive branch allocates such assistance. Bilateral development activities could be aligned more closely with U.S. objectives in Pakistan and also channeled through the government. For all U.S. support, Congress could conduct oversight of the delivery challenges encountered, including access and security conditions in Pakistan, which could undermine the effectiveness of humanitarian operations and development aid; and/or assess the flood disaster responses of the Islamabad government and international donors so as to improve disaster preparedness and prevention activities, and to reduce the harm caused by future flood events.

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