

WORLD

# Through Hell And High Water

Devastating floods have pushed Pakistan to the brink. As the waters subside, a stunned and fearful nation confronts itself, its future and the tough choices that must be made

BY OMAR WARAICH/NOWSHERA



**Grave predicament** *Displaced by the floods, many seek shelter at the Makli necropolis in Thatta, Sindh province*

Photographs by Massimo Berruti for TIME



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USAFIR KHAN tilts back a dusty prayer cap, shuts his small, sunken eyes and wrings the sweat from his beard. The 55-year-old grandfather says he should be accustomed to the heat by now, but it's difficult to see how he or any of the other 6 million people rendered homeless by Pakistan's floods can get used to the misery in which they find themselves. "The tents are unbearable," he says. He gestures across one of the makeshift camps that sprawl around the north-west garrison town of Nowshera, where temperatures easily reach 38°C and winds fall to an evil, scorching whisper. "It's better outside."

For five weeks, Khan and his relatives have sat there, under the white, overwhelming sun. Near the ragged rope beds on which he and his male relatives are clustered, young children—some of them naked—trudge across the dirt. Some have red-streaked hair, a sign of the protein deficiency that occurs in malnutrition. Small helpings of food arrive at either end of the day, between which everyone is hungry—not only because it's Ramadan, but also because there just isn't enough. The camp's medic reports that many suffer from scabies and diarrhea, but they've at least been spared the cholera that is a constant fear in this flood-ravaged land.

Khan has no idea when he will return to his village. His mud-brick home has been washed away. "When we left our homes, there was water everywhere," he recalls. "It was rising up our legs at the same time as it poured on our heads." His two sons, both builders, fear that they may no longer be able to support the family. "Only Allah knows what will happen to us," Khan says.

When the floodwaters that burst free of the Indus River finally empty into the Arabian Sea, they will leave behind a land mired in the mud of uncertainty. One of the biggest natural calamities in Pakistan's history has overwhelmed an already creaky state. A civilian govern-

ment has been further weakened after being seen to fail its people. A powerful army may have burnished its reputation by leading the rescue efforts, but it finds itself overstretched. Militants, restrained by military offensives last year, now sense opportunity. A fresh wave of terrorist attacks is sweeping across the country. The economy has been ravaged to the tune of tens of billions of dollars. And with a third of all agricultural crops submerged, there are fears of food shortages and ensuing civil unrest.

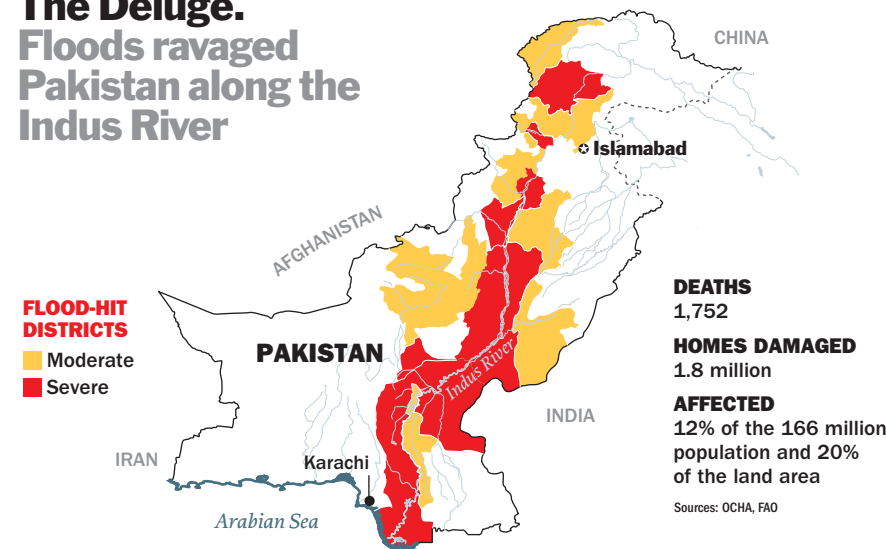
Many Pakistanis gloomily acknowledge that things have never been worse. A few live in the hope that the disaster will transform the country, alerting not just themselves but also the global community to Pakistan's parlous state and prompting some sort of redemptive change in national direction. Rather more Pakistanis, however, feel that there is no political leader able to channel those hopes. Indeed, some say that nothing can stop the nation from its grim, gothic slide into anarchy and failure. But there is one thing that everybody agrees on: Pakistan will never be the same. Shockwaves from the Great Flood of 2010 are being felt in politics, counterterrorism, the economy and the soul of a nation.

**Postdiluvian Politics**

"I DON'T THINK ANYBODY WILL FULLY RECOVER," President Asif Ali Zardari recently conceded to a group of journalists. He most certainly won't. As the floods hit, his administration came under attack for failing to respond to the needs of the 20 million people affected. Rescue and relief efforts were wretchedly slow and Zardari's absence didn't help. He was, admittedly, on long-scheduled state visits to France and the U.K. to discuss the important business of counterterrorism, and while there was able to raise money for flood victims (even if he did sneak a quick holiday in his 16th century Norman château). But when Zardari was slipping off to the Elysée Palace or being chauffeured to Chequers,



**The Deluge.**  
Floods ravaged Pakistan along the Indus River



Pakistan's army chief and the country's opposition leaders were pictured on TV, devotedly hastening to flood victims and scoring political capital. Junior partners in Zardari's ruling coalition, seizing on popular anger at the President's failure to lead from the front, are calling for rebellion. Altaf Hussain, the leader of the Karachi-based Muttahida Quami Movement, which is a member of Zardari's coalition, has demanded a "French-style" revolution, urging "patriotic generals" to rid the country of "feudals" and "corrupt politicians."

A widespread willingness, even on the part of the homeless, to recognize that the scale of the disaster was beyond anyone's control will buy Zardari some time. "The whole of Pakistan has become a river, from Swat to Karachi. What can any government do?" asks flood victim Khan in the Nowshera camp, throwing his hands

**Escape by air** With bridges destroyed, those stranded rely on hastily improvised means of crossing the Swat River

in the air. Keen for democracy to remain in place, the political opposition will also not countenance any sudden, arbitrary attempts to oust Zardari. "My party is terribly disappointed with the performance of the Zardari government," says Nisar Ali Khan of the Pakistan Muslim League and leader of the opposition. "But we feel very strongly that the failures of this government should not be seen as the failures of democracy. This government should only be removed by the democratic process, and at the moment we are mired in so many difficulties you can't think of an election."

When a poll can be countenanced, change is likely. (Before the monsoon rains, opinion polls registered Zardari's



**A nation drained** *The waters have ebbed, but heartache, lack of shelter and chaotic relief distribution still characterize life for the displaced*

popularity at 20%; it must now be in single digits.) But the army, of course, may intervene first. To be sure, it isn't likely to gratuitously tarnish its newfound popularity by staging a hasty coup, and it wouldn't want to offend Washington, which has worked to shore up Pakistan's fledgling democracy, unless there were extremely pressing reasons for doing so. The army should also be satisfied with the amount of power that it currently enjoys—"it controls decision-making on foreign policy and national security," says Farzana Shaikh, author of *Making Sense of Pakistan*. And yet a coup cannot be ruled out. "The moments when the army has seized power are generally when the country has been on its knees and it steps in as a savior," Shaikh adds. "There's no reason why we shouldn't expect a repeat performance."

### The War and the Flood

AT RAWALPINDI'S HEAVILY FORTIFIED military headquarters, all attention is focused on the 72,000 troops engaged in the war on flood damage—and for the war against Taliban militancy, that is a problem. Units defending territory that had been wrenched back from militants in the Swat Valley are now needed elsewhere. Action against the Taliban hasn't entirely stopped—the fighting continues in the tribal areas of Khyber, Bajaur and especially Orakzai, where many militants fled after last year's offensive in South Waziristan and from where they threaten the city of Peshawar. But offensives have been put on hold. "In the areas where one had a plan for an offensive position, one is being forced to take a defensive position," sighs a senior military official, who spoke to TIME under condition of anonymity. The prospect of a push into North Waziristan, long urged by Washington, is not an option for the foreseeable future.

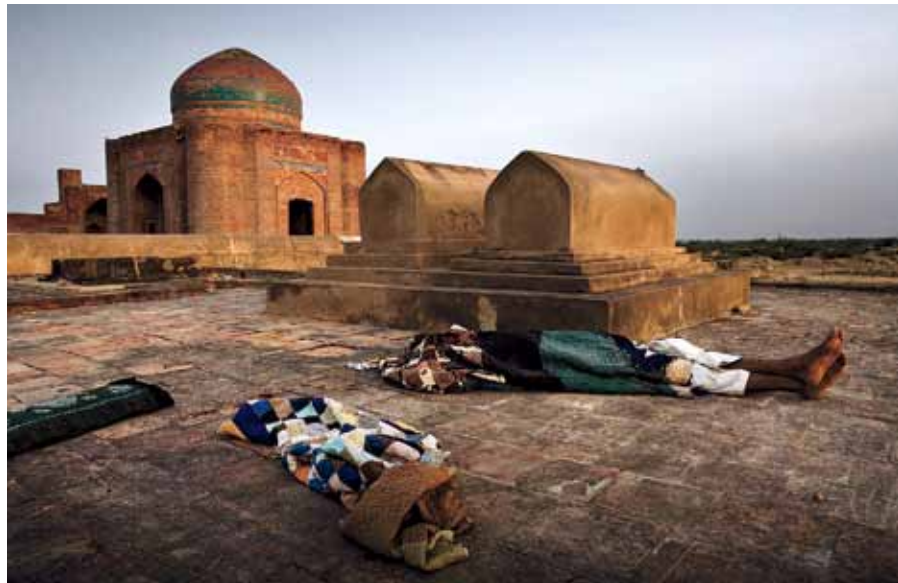
With the army and the state overstretched, the militants are gaining new ground. Already, there is a resigned acceptance of their role in flood relief. Militant groups have set up hundreds of tents and distributed food and medication. "[Given] the kind of catastrophe that you see, you have to work with the devil," the military official says. "One would like to offer him some space to help us." Banned terror outfits like the Jamaat-ud-Dawa—blamed for

the November 2008 Mumbai massacre—have re-emerged under new names and with an unsettling confidence. *Nawa-i-Waqt*, a widely circulated Urdu daily, carried an advertisement from the group on Aug. 4 soliciting funds for its flood-relief work.

Some of the areas worst hit by floods—the northwest and southern Punjab—look certain to provide fresh Taliban recruits, since poverty has long been Pakistani fanaticism's most potent fuel. "If, when the people go back, the state fails to provide basic means of survival, then they could be lured by the militants," the military official says. The Taliban's claim that the floods were divine punishment for Pakistan's failure to adhere to the strict tenets

of Shari'a, or Islamic law, already has considerable purchase among deeply religious sections of society.

In the meantime, extremists are taking terrifying advantage of a nation's distraction. On Sept. 1, a triple suicide bombing targeting Shi'ite Muslims ripped through the city of Lahore, killing 35, injuring more than 200 and sparking violent protests against a police force seen as ineffective and unprepared. On Sept. 3, at least 59 Shi'ites were killed when a bomber attacked a procession in the southwestern city of Quetta. Four days later, a bomb placed in a police compound in the northwest killed 16, mostly women and children, and wounded at least 50. "The worst aspect of the floods is the further erosion



of the state, and the vacuum is being filled by the extremists," says Iqbal Haider, a human-rights campaigner and former Law Minister.

### A Widening Toll

AS BOMBS ROCK THE COUNTRY, FEARS ARE also building of the social unrest that may be triggered by an economic meltdown. The country's largest city and commercial hub, Karachi, is already on a knife-edge. Plagued by Pakistan's highest levels of sectarian killings, this heaving metropolis of 18 million fitfully erupts into spasms of violence as rival ethnic and political groups engage in open gun battles. The city comes to a juddering halt for days. "It affects me badly," says Zubair Gilani, who runs a factory that designs and produces fashionable clothes for export to Italy.

By hitting the supply of cotton, the floods will now only add to the woes of garment businesses like Gilani's and thereby undermine one of Pakistan's chief exports. Even more seriously, in the rural areas of Sindh province beyond Karachi, the loss of rice and possibly wheat crops over the coming months will hit the agricultural sector and has sparked fears of food shortages. Floodwaters have destroyed 3.6 million hectares (8.9 million acres) of agricultural land and killed 7.2 million farm animals, according to the government's figures. "There will be no income at least until March," says Hamir Soomro, a landowner from the town of Shikarpur, where his family's 1,200 acres of rice have been submerged and his wheat seed for the winter washed away.

Those who depended on the land have had to flee. In the historic town of Thatta, the road from Karachi is lined with families sitting helplessly in the open air. Others are crowded in the Makli necropolis, a 14th century graveyard consecrated to the region's Sufi saints, with some leaning on tombstones for support. Many Sindhis—perhaps as many as 200,000—have made for the dubious shelter of Karachi's slums and tent cities, adding to a volatile ethnic mix of Urdu speakers and Pashtuns. "The city can't cope with this many people," says a Sindh provincial government official who did not wish to be named. "There will be tensions. The crime rate will rise. And how long will the government be able to feed these people?" The situation is not much better in the countryside, where already rampant banditry looks set to increase along with land disputes. "Farmers are arming themselves in advance," says Soomro.

**'The whole of Pakistan has become a river. What can any government do?'**

—MUSAFIR KHAN, FLOOD VICTIM, NOWSHERA





**Dead to the world** A graveyard at Nowshera, central Pakistan, reflects the despair hanging over flood-ravaged areas

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has warned his Cabinet of the “serious social implications” that economic misery could trigger. By some estimates, he said, the damage inflicted to the economy could be as high as \$43 billion—a quarter of the country’s GDP. Some economists dispute the figure as being too pessimistic, but that doesn’t alter Pakistan’s fundamental desperation. The country has received \$3 billion in loans from the World Bank

and the Asian Development Bank for relief and reconstruction, swelling its already \$55.5 billion external debt. It is also dependent on an \$11.3 billion support package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), whose conditions Pakistan was struggling to meet before the floods. After the disaster, growth is set to slow by as much as 2%, inflation to rise and the budget deficit to grow—all trending against IMF stipulations.

Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, Pakistan’s Finance Minister, hasn’t conceded defeat yet. “[The floods] could be an opportunity to make tough decisions,” he says. “For example, we could push through a sales

tax, introduce a flood surcharge on well-to-do people and get some leeway from the IMF and the international community.” He speaks of the recovery effort as “a spur of economic activity,” boosting construction and allied sectors. In agriculture, he believes there will be gains in the long run, with the water table rising for better-irrigated crops, and the silt left over from the floods making more land more cultivable.

For many Pakistanis, however, that’s impossibly far ahead. It’s the coming months that fill them with foreboding. This year’s Independence Day celebrations, on Aug. 14, were scarcely marked. The

usual sharp surge in Ramadan retail sales eluded Islamabad and Karachi’s eerily quiet shopping centers. Television and radio stations have attempted to revive spirits by replaying patriotic pop songs that recall brighter days, but it’s a forlorn effort. To make matters worse, the Pakistan cricket team, a rare source of national pride, has been embroiled in scandal, with three of its leading players suspended after allegations of match-fixing. “It’s deeply disappointing,” says former cricket legend Imran Khan. “There’s the war on terror, this flood devastation, and all of this has made it just that much more demoralizing.”

## It’s as if the waters have receded to reveal decades of neglect by successive regimes

### A Nation Endures

WITHOUT EVEN SPORTING DISTRACTIONS to rely on, postdiluvian Pakistanis are left to simply scrutinize themselves, and the collective examination is painful. The old fictions—that everything terrible befalling the country must be the result of archenemy India or the Taliban or the machinations of the U.S.—no longer hold true. Instead, there is a widespread realization that the devastating ease with which the floodwaters swept away lives and livelihoods has nothing to do with external agents, and everything to do with the failure of successive governments to invest in infrastructure and development. It’s as if the waters have receded to reveal decades of neglect by regimes that pursued nuclear and military ambitions instead of new industries, decent roads, civil-aid plans and sturdy bridges.

These days, it’s clear to everyone that tens of millions are struggling on the margins, driven there by a government that spends less than 1.5% of GDP on education and health. In the cities’ well-heeled neighborhoods, social gatherings have become more solemn affairs. As glasses are drained and ashtrays filled, political and social gossip has been displaced by talk of the floods’ misery. “Many of us who comfortably sat in cities were not aware of the poverty in rural areas,” says Ayesha Tammy Haq, a Karachi-based columnist and television talk-show host. “Now it’s come into our living rooms through the television and it’s sitting on the highway,” she adds, gesturing at the human tide on one of Karachi’s fume-choked thoroughfares. Her prognosis for Pakistan is not happy. “People said this country would change before, but it hasn’t,” she says, referring to the hope-filled aftermath of the 2005 Kashmir earthquake and the optimism generated more recently by the so-called lawyers’ movement—a campaign that succeeded in reinstating the country’s chief justice after his 2007 dismissal by military ruler General Pervez Musharraf. “If you want to harness resentment and anger, you need leadership,” she says. “We haven’t seen a leader emerge out of the floods.”

For Gilani, the clothes exporter, the cataclysmic national crises are occurring far too frequently. The last was the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007, in the wake of which his factory was ransacked and burned down as angry mobs tore through the streets of Karachi and large black columns of smoke filled the air. The insurance was only sufficient for recouping half of his assets. “It’ll take me at least another year before we recover,” says Gilani. But his attitude toward Pakistan’s future has irrevocably changed. “I don’t want my children to live in this country,” he says. “The reason why people don’t leave is because they don’t have options. If you took a poll of people asking if they’d like to have a green card, only a few madmen would say no.”

With most people having no choice but to continue living in Pakistan, the population seems to be drawing tentative hope from two areas. The first is the country’s geopolitical significance. Pakistan is simply too important for the U.S. and its allies to give up on. Not only does its collapse imperil the war in Afghanistan, but the destabilization of the world’s second largest Muslim nation and the threat of its nuclear stockpile slipping loose are the West’s worst nightmare. “The situation is grim beyond belief,” says analyst Shaikh, “but [Pakistan is] somehow kept afloat by the international community, just enough to keep it from breaking at the seams.”

The second saving grace is the fact that ordinary Pakistanis have not given up on themselves. At the dusty camp in Nowshera, Sher Muhammad speaks of his bleak prospects. “I used to build houses,” he says. “The money was good, but I could only get work five or 10 days a month. Now there is no work for me to do. Everything has been washed away.” He is angry with the government and what he describes as its indifference to the poor. But he is not looking to anyone but the poor for answers. “We can’t go out and protest in the streets—the police will come and beat us. All we can do is hide that anger in our hearts, and slowly rebuild this country ourselves. It’s our country. We can’t see it fall.”