

Pakistan Floods
UNHCR Submission to the International Development Select Committee
December 2010

1. UNHCR's longstanding presence in Pakistan

UNHCR has been present in Pakistan for some thirty years working on the Afghan refugee programme. The Office enjoys a long-standing partnership with the Government of Pakistan and has demonstrated its ability to deliver in emergencies in the country. For this reason, UNHCR felt it necessary to fully engage in the response to the floods.

2. UNHCR's Response and Key Challenges

To date, the Office has reached over 7 million persons with the distribution of non-food items (NFIs) and 1.6 million persons with emergency shelter across the four affected provinces.

3. The magnitude and nature of the disaster has been a massive challenge in itself. The term 'slow moving tsunami' has been used to coin the evolving nature of the floods and how it continues to present contrasting realities from one affected province to another. An example of the dynamic nature of the situation can be seen in how returns and recovery are currently take place in northern parts of the country while large parts of Sindh still have standing waters causing continued and secondary displacement among the population.
4. Access by the humanitarian community to affected populations was one of the main challenges in the initial response to the floods. High water levels and the security situation in certain areas played equal roles in humanitarian agencies' inability to reach many affected locations. Many geographical areas remained isolated for weeks due to destroyed and washed away roads and bridges. The military was, however, to a certain extent, able to fill this gap by accessing isolated locations by helicopter and boats.
5. The security situation in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan also meant that even once water levels had receded, some areas remained no go areas. Teams composed of UN national staff, as opposed to international staff members, enjoyed freer movement and thus, to some extent, were able to fill this gap.
6. The identification of the growing humanitarian needs was another major challenge and included the inability to quickly determine planning figures and to define comprehensive strategies entailing the way forward. Given the evolving nature of the disaster, the challenge was two-fold as there was a steady growth in the number of affected people as well as a growth in affected provinces (as the floods had first been confined to Balochistan and KPK and then Sindh and Punjab).

7. Coordination: the Cluster system and partnerships with NGOs

UNHCR is the lead in the Protection and Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) clusters in the Pakistan flood emergency response across all four affected provinces. As per IASC arrangements, IFRC is the lead in the Shelter/NFI cluster in natural disasters. In response to the floods, however, IOM was designated cluster lead. Furthermore, given UNHCR's strong existing presence, the Office has been leading the cluster in Balochistan and KPK and is extending its support to IOM, cluster members and the Government in Punjab and Sindh. UNHCR is the lead of the Humanitarian Coordinator Group in Balochistan.

8. Responding to a natural disaster of this magnitude, parts of the humanitarian community have called for a review of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) arrangements, which are believed to be better fitted for responding to medium sized disasters as opposed to large and complex ones such as the Pakistan floods.

9. In Pakistan, challenges regarding the cluster system have been province specific. At the outset of the emergency the clusters served as forums in bringing relevant actors together to better understand the dynamic environment and situation. Additionally, in locations where presence of the humanitarian community and Government authorities was consolidated, easier coordination and partnerships existed.

10. The system has areas that need to be strengthened in order to ascertain better coordination in a future emergency of this scale. This includes inter and intra cluster arrangements as clusters have been criticised for falling into 'silo like' and compartmentalised structures. In this respect, by strengthening inter-cluster mechanisms, clusters should be challenged to approach their activities in a more comprehensive and integrated manner. The need to build awareness of coordination mechanisms as opposed to information sharing mechanisms among cluster members is also vital and by doing so can help in changing the dynamics of meetings and collaboration between agencies. The need to refrain from creating parallel systems of coordination and adding layers to the already cumbersome system has also been flagged.

11. Limited capacity

The initial response by the humanitarian community in the South was considerably weakened by a limited existing presence there unlike in KPK, and to a lesser extent Balochistan, where UNHCR and the humanitarian community have well-established partnerships and knowledge of the provinces. As a result, the ability for international humanitarian organisations to quickly expand their presence to Sindh and parts of Punjab as the floods moved south was challenging. Months on and given the sheer scale of the crisis, the number of international NGOs present in the province remains insufficient. Perceptions of the security situation in the South, may also have led to the reluctance of more international NGOs from moving into the province at a quicker pace.



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12. Furthermore, with the province having been oriented more towards development programmes prior to the floods, there was a general lack of experience and knowledge in responding to emergencies. In this light, the Office feels that building the capacity of local NGOs not only in Sindh but also in other areas of the country is vital to ensure their comprehensive participation in this response and in other future emergencies.
13. The Office has also identified the need to extend capacity building to the National and Provincial Disaster Management Authorities (NDMA and PDMA), thus creating better coordination and partnership between the Office and these entities.

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