

U.S. Militarism and Pakistan's Floods

Even in a time of global climate change, the immense suffering of the Pakistani people due to vast floods did not have to happen. Investment in infrastructure and a timely emergency response program could have minimized what has become one of the world's worst disasters. But decades of U.S. intervention to keep corrupt and reactionary military regimes in power against the will of the people have left this country one of the poorest and least developed in the region.

The United Nations rated the floods in Pakistan in mid-August 2010 as the greatest humanitarian crisis in recent history, with more people affected than by the Southeast Asian tsunami and the recent earthquakes in Kashmir and Haiti combined.

In the week since the Aug. 9, 2010, estimate, the number of people affected has doubled to more than 20 million left homeless and utterly destitute.

The floods will grow far worse in the coming week as record high waters move further downstream toward larger population centers in south Pakistan.

U.N. emergency relief coordinator John Holmes said the numbers would reach 40 to 50 million people in need of immediate assistance, out of a population of 170 million.

Millions of people are stranded without access to potable drinking water, basic food or shelter. Millions are on the move seeking higher ground or are packed onto the roofs of buildings or small hills on the wide floodplains of the Swat and Indus rivers.

Floodwaters cover all the cultivated land in Pakistan. Every major food and cash crop is lost. The agricultural heartland, the breadbasket of Pakistan, is wiped out.

Floodwaters have knocked out electricity and communication in large parts of the country.

Although this year there were record monsoon rains, this massive widespread flooding is no natural disaster. Angry commentators in Pakistan are calling it “a man-made catastrophe.”

The floods are not just an accident of nature. Dire warnings of the massive scope of this flood were predicted in late July, weeks in advance, when unusually heavy rain hit the upper reaches of the Swat River and the highlands in the north. It was the heaviest rain in 35 years.

Months before, flooding and heavy monsoon rains had been predicted. But even after 10 days of early floods had impacted 5 million people in a large area of the north, after the news media had given daily coverage of families clinging to tree branches, fields inundated and houses collapsing, no government organizations had even begun to prepare for emergencies or for the evacuation of large numbers of people.

This includes the Pakistani military, the dominant force in Pakistan.

An earthquake, whether in Haiti, China, Chile or Kashmir, usually strikes with little warning. A tsunami prediction after an undersea earthquake gives people only a few hours' notice. There might be just a few days' notice that a hurricane or typhoon of great magnitude is brewing.

But the fact that massive floods would inundate vast areas downstream in Pakistan was known well in advance. Yet Pakistani officials took no steps to notify the population at risk or move emergency equipment into the region, from boats to portable bridges, potable water, emergency tents and medicines.

All the words of concern from humanitarian agencies are starting to pour forth. But so far the amount of aid reaching Pak-

istan from the U.S., NATO countries and U.N. agencies is among the smallest ever for disaster relief.

Washington has promised \$55 million for emergency aid and the use of six helicopters. What an insult! Just this year Congress allocated to the Pentagon more than 1,000 times this paltry amount to continue to fight its wars in the region.

Those disastrous floods are a graphic example of how Pakistan's unequal, dependent relationship with the U.S. has left it totally unprepared to deal with unusually heavy rainfall at a time of global climate change.

Partnership with U.S.

The alliance with the U.S. has been of absolutely no help in the country's hour of greatest need. The corrupt feudal officials and even more corrupt repressive military, all kept in power by enormous amounts of U.S. military aid, have proved totally unable to even notify the millions of people who were clearly at risk or to move into place the most basic emergency equipment.

Washington is more than willing to sell Pakistan F-16 jets, hundreds of surface-to-air missiles and surveillance planes. This is enormously profitable to U.S. military contractors and Pakistan ends up ever further in debt.

Meanwhile, Pakistan today lacks the most basic flood control system. There is a total lack of investment funds or foreign aid for flood control. A basic system of dams, reservoirs, containment basins, embankments and levees could have contained the water and prevented out-of-control flooding in the vulnerable region.

Major rivers throughout the U.S., Europe, Japan and now China have well-organized flood control.

The lack of flood control in Pakistan has destroyed hundreds of miles of roads and railroad lines, bridges, schools, hospitals and electric generators. More than 6,000 villages have been swept away. Towns and now even cities are submerged.

For decades Washington has made generous funds available to Pakistan for police and intelligence agencies, but infrastructure development, education, health and other social needs have been neglected. Pakistan is more than \$40 billion in debt, much of it for U.S. military equipment.

According to figures of the United Nations Children's Fund, even before the flood devastation 30 percent of Pakistani children were chronically malnourished; only half of the 19 million children of primary school age were enrolled in school; and two-thirds of the women are illiterate.

There has been a heavy presence of the Pakistani military in the Swat region and the Northwest Frontier Province, where the flooding began. But their role was entirely focused on the most brutal repression, not emergency relief.

Last summer, under enormous political pressure from the U.S., Pakistan's military launched intensely destructive counter-insurgency campaigns against the Taliban in northern Pakistan, Bajaur, the Swat Valley and South Waziristan.

In the Swat Valley, which has many cities, the Pakistani military faced resistance from an urban population of 4 million people. Two million refugees were forced to flee their homes during the battles there. Millions rushed for cover from the intense bombardment, yet the government had no relief plans for these desperate war refugees.

None of the U.S.-supplied heavy equipment in the region was used to build one bridge or one dam. It was used only to lay waste to the region.

The very Islamic organizations that have been able to provide emergency relief for the refugees, both then and now during the flooding, are what the U.S. and Pakistani military are trying to destroy.

As floodwaters were roaring on Aug. 14, 2010, U.S. drones struck again, killing at least 13 people in Pakistan's North Waziristan district, close to the Afghan border.

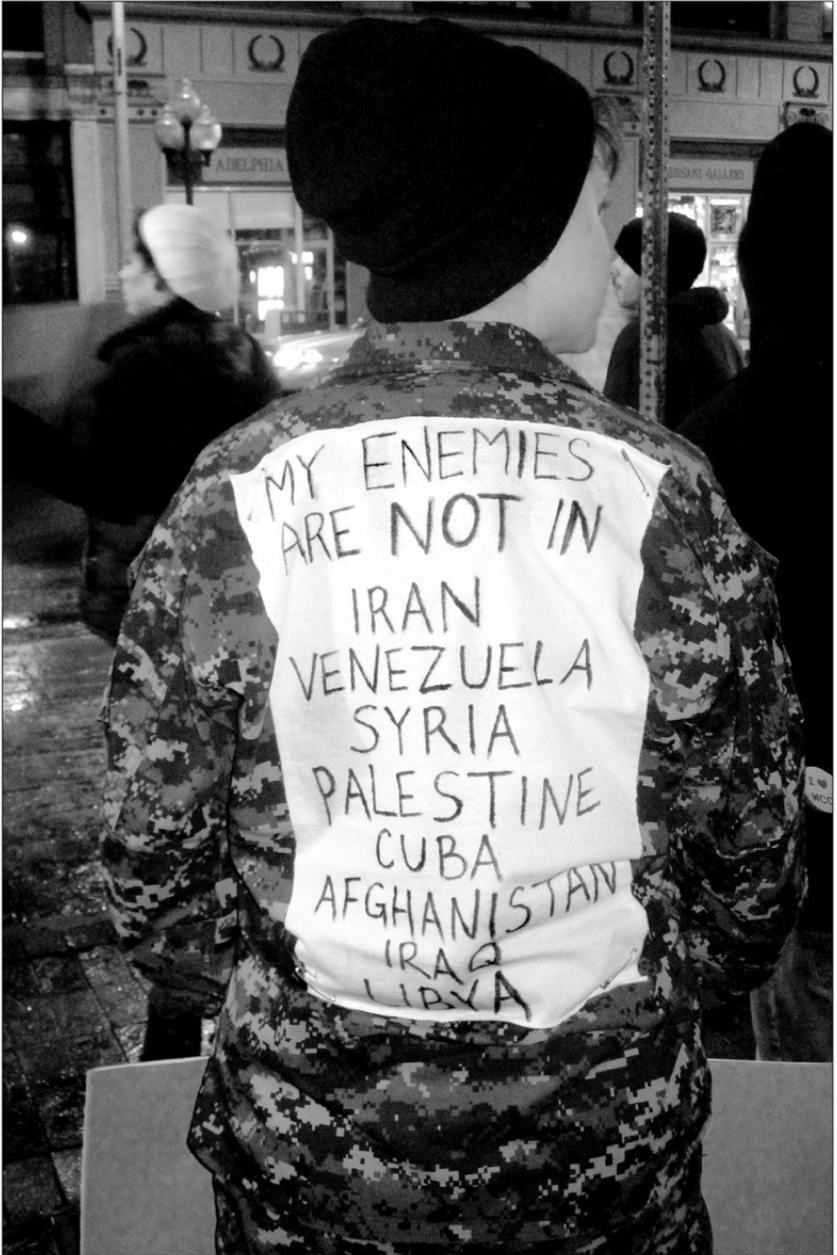
U.S. and NATO forces are an overwhelming presence in Afghanistan, just across the border. Their technology is so sophisticated that the Pentagon can maneuver a pilotless drone from the other side of the planet and have it fire a missile into Afghanistan or Pakistan.

But it does not even take complicated technology to measure rainfall or communicate weather threats to millions of people. The equipment to do this has been around for decades.

However, this simple task appears to be impossible because the U.S., the most powerful of the exploiting capitalist countries, subverts popular governments while promoting those who collaborate with its system based on maximizing profit, where technology is at the service of imperialist military oppression.

To respond to natural and human-made emergencies, what is needed is the uprooting of this capitalist system of exploitation and national oppression so every country can establish planning to meet its people's needs.

Published August 18, 2010



WW PHOTO: MINNIE BRUCE PRATT

Occupy Syracuse, Nov. 2011.