

Risk of disease rises amid deadly Pakistan floods

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People collect households from their houses destroyed by heavy floods in Nowshera, Pakistan on Monday, Aug. 2, 2010. The government has deployed thousands of soldiers and civilian rescue workers to save an estimated 28,000 people trapped by the floodwaters, distribute food and collect the bodies of the victims. (AP Photo/Mohammad Sajjad)

(AP) -- Pakistan dispatched medical teams Monday to the deluged northwest amid fears that cholera could spread after the worst floods in the country's history that have already killed up to 1,200 people, an official said.

The disaster has forced around 2 million to flee their homes. Residents have railed against the government for failing to provide enough emergency assistance nearly a week after extremely heavy [monsoon](#) rains triggered raging floodwaters in Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa province.

Around 250 flood victims blocked a main road in the hard-hit district of Nowshera late Monday, complaining they had receiving little or no assistance, according to an Associated Press Television News cameraman at the scene.

The government says it has deployed thousands of rescue workers who have so far saved an estimated 28,000 people and distributed basic food items. The army has also sent some 30,000 troops and dozens of helicopters, but the scale of the disaster is so vast that many residents said it seems like officials are doing nothing. Thousands more people in the province remain trapped by the floodwaters.

The anger of the flood victims poses a danger to the already struggling government, now competing with Islamist movements to deliver aid in a region with strong Taliban influence.

"We need tents. Just look around," said flood victim Faisal Islam, sitting on the only dry ground he could find in Nowshera district - a highway median - surrounded by hundreds of people in makeshift shelters constructed from dirty sheets and plastic tarps.

Like many other residents of Pakistan's northwest, people camped out by the highway in Kamp Koroona village waded through the water to their damaged houses to salvage their remaining possessions: usually just a few mud-covered plates and chairs.

"This is the only shirt I have. Everything else is buried," said Islam.

The army has given them some [cooking oil](#) and sugar, but Islam complained that they needed much more.

Now people in the northwest also face the threat of waterborne disease - which could kill thousands more if health workers cannot deliver enough

clean drinking water and treat and isolate any patients in crowded relief camps.

"To avert the looming threat of spread of waterborne diseases, especially cholera, we have dispatched dozens of mobile medical teams in the affected districts," said Sohail Altaf, the top medical official in Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa.

Officials have yet to receive concrete reports of [cholera](#) cases, but fear of an outbreak is high, said Altaf. Patients with stomach problems from dirty water are being treated in government medical camps, he said.

The Pakistan Red Crescent and International Red Cross said they were distributing aid and evaluating further needs in areas isolated by washed-out bridges and roads.

The flooding crisis is especially dire because so many people lost literally all that they had, said Muhammad Ateeb Siddiqui, the Red Crescent's director of operations.

"We now need to urgently distribute not only food but also the means to cook it," he said. "The distribution of relief is severely constrained by damaged infrastructure, and the widespread contamination of water supplies has the potential to create major health problems."

The agencies said the flooding impact would shift south in the coming days as the waters moved downstream.

The disastrous flooding comes at a time when the weak and unpopular Pakistani government is already struggling to cope with a faltering economy and a brutal war against Taliban militants that has killed thousands of people in the past few years.

The death toll from the disaster has ranged from about 870 provided by the prime minister's office to 1,200 given by Bashir Ahmed Bilour, senior minister in Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa, who warned that it could go even higher. More than 2 million people have been displaced, he said.

Pakistan's international partners have tried to bolster the government's response by offering millions of dollars in emergency aid.

The United Nations and the United States announced Saturday that they would provide \$10 million dollars each in emergency assistance. The U.S. has also provided rescue boats, water filtration units, prefabricated steel bridges and thousands of packaged meals that Pakistani soldiers tossed from helicopters as flood victims scrambled to catch them.

The high-profile U.S. gesture of support comes at a time when the Obama administration is trying to dampen anti-American sentiment in Pakistan and enlist the country's support to turn around the Afghan war.

The U.S. provided similar emergency assistance after Pakistan experienced a catastrophic earthquake in 2005 that killed nearly 80,000 people. The aid briefly increased support for the U.S. in a country where anti-American sentiment is pervasive.

But feelings have since shifted, and only 17 percent of Pakistanis now have a favorable view of the U.S., according to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center. Conducted in April 2010, the survey has a margin of error of three percentage points.

The U.S. could be hoping to get a similar popularity boost from the emergency flood assistance. But like the earthquake relief effort, the U.S. must compete with aid groups run by Islamist militants who also use assistance to increase their support.

Representatives from a charity allegedly linked to the Lashkar-e-Taiba militant group distributed food and offered medical services on Sunday to victims in the town of Charsada.

With suspected ties to al-Qaida, Lashkar-e-Taiba has been blamed for the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, India, that killed 166 people, and the U.S. military has said the group has stepped up activity in Afghanistan as well.

Pakistani militant groups often rail against government ineffectiveness as a way to build support, a message likely to resonate with many in the northwest who have criticized the official flood response.

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