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# Disaster takes Pakistan close to collapse



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**Extremists groups fill the vacuum left by an incompetent government.**

HE devastating floods destroying vast areas of Pakistan are an overwhelming tragedy that the country, already crippled by rampant terrorism, could do without.

Emergency officials have publicly admitted that they were simply not ready for a disaster on this scale. Any country would struggle to deal with such a calamity, but the government's sluggish, at times insensitive and generally ineffective response is bad news on two fronts: it further weakens an already unpopular President and it further complicates the battle against Pakistani militants.

According to estimates from the United Nations and Pakistani officials, about 14 million people have been affected and more than 1½ million people left homeless in the north-west of the country alone. Entire villages have been washed away, and more than 1600 people have died — a figure that is expected to rise. Cholera has reportedly broken out in some areas.

The floodwaters have des-

troys infrastructure including bridges, roads, schools, hospitals, electricity networks and sewerage systems. While the number of dead is relatively small compared with the 73,000 people who died in the 2005 earthquake, it is the wholesale physical destruction of so much socio-economic hardware that is so devastating.

For a poor country already struggling to make ends meet, it is too much to cope with. Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani said "the physical damage is beyond imagination" and that Pakistan "had gone back several years". Meanwhile, the rivers are still rising, with more heavy rain expected in the north-west of the country. There is undoubtedly more destruction to come.

President Asif Ali Zardari was deeply unpopular even before the floods. Considered aloof and corrupt, even by Pakistani standards, he was seen as out of touch with the people. But his reaction to the floods has compounded his poor political standing. As the floodwaters were ravaging his country, he decided to proceed

with a planned trip to Paris and London, confronting British Prime Minister David Cameron after the latter, during a recent trip to India, accused Pakistan of promoting "the export of terror".

While the bilateral meeting was a civilised affair, the reception given to Zardari by the Pakistani community in Britain was less so — he was welcomed with chants of "remove Zardari to save Pakistan" and "go, Zardari, go". The ultimate insult was having shoes hurled at him during a speech he was delivering.

Given all this negative publicity, Zardari finally decided to stop frolicking around the world and return home.

However, the damage has been done and it is difficult to see how he will recover politically. His callous and insensitive behaviour can only help his political nemesis, Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the main opposition party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz.

Sharif, who was ousted as prime minister in 1999 in a coup led by General Pervez



Musharraf, is keen to return to power. And, as far as he's concerned, the sooner the better. With Punjab, the country's most important province, as his power base and his brother as governor of the province, he has a good chance of succeeding.

Elections are not due for another three years but, given Zardari's poor tracking, Nawaz may well be in the presidential palace earlier. It would not necessarily be good news for Pakistan.

Mockingly referred to by his political opponents as "a mulah without a beard", Nawaz is close to the Taliban-friendly religious parties. He advocates talking to the Pakistani Taliban militants who have been terrorising the country for the past four years, killing about 10,000 people.

Meanwhile, the very same militant groups, such as

Lashkar-e-Taiba, accused of being behind the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008, have been filling the vacuum left by an incompetent central government, and providing desperately needed help through their charity wings.

They did the same during the 2005 earthquake. Such assistance from the religious extremists, while welcomed, does not mean that the population is going to join their ranks, but it does send the message that the government can neither protect the population nor provide them with the aid they need.

And to demonstrate how much they have grown, the Pakistani Taliban have urged the government to reject US aid for the flood victims and said that if it did, they would provide \$20 million in assistance.

The international com-

munity, including the US, China and Britain, has responded to the Prime Minister's desperate call for help, pledging tens of millions of dollars. Australia has pledged \$10 million. Unfortunately, this is only a fraction of the billions of dollars that will be needed to reconstruct the country. The UN Secretary-General's special envoy for assistance to Pakistan, Jean-Maurice Ripert, has said he has no idea where the money will come from.

Two questions arise in the wake of this latest catastrophe: how many more body blows can Pakistan endure before it drops to its knees, and who would gain if it did?

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