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Pakistan: UN renews appeal to avert public health disaster in wake of climate induced floods

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Pakistan is on “the verge of a public health disaster” following “unprecedented climate induced floods,” the United Nations has warned while launching a new humanitarian appeal for \$81m.¹

The revised appeal from the UN and the government of Pakistan is a fivefold increase on the previous request as officials warned that the destruction of public health facilities and water systems puts millions of people at increased risk of malnutrition and disease.

The floods, affecting a population of 33 million people in Pakistan, were caused by heavy monsoon rains that started in mid-July.²

An estimated 1600 people were killed in the floods but Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director general of the World Health Organisation, warned that many more lives could be lost in the coming weeks if Pakistan does not get more support.

“The water has stopped rising, but the danger has not, we are on the verge of a public health disaster,” he said. “And even as we respond to the emergency in Pakistan, we must remember that unless we tackle the existential threat of climate change, we will be responding to emergencies like this and worse more often.”

Over two million homes have been destroyed or damaged forcing people to live in the open as winter approaches, according to UN agencies. More than 1500 health and support facilities are badly damaged and stocks of essential drugs and medical supplies are limited or have been washed away. Disease surveillance and referral mechanisms have also been severely disrupted. On top of this 13 000 km of roads are badly damaged, making it extremely difficult, and at times impossible, to reach families in need.

There are now outbreaks of malaria, cholera, and dengue and an increase in skin infections, according to WHO. An estimated 2000 women are giving birth every day, most of them in unsafe conditions.

The focus of the UN appeal is to provide humanitarian assistance to 9.5 million people in the 34 most affected districts in Balochistan, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Punjab.

A situation report from Unicef from 28 September said that the stagnant water around the camps and settlements of displaced families are a fertile breeding ground for vector borne and waterborne disease including malaria and dengue fever.³ In Sindh and Balochistan, the two most affected provinces, there has been a threefold increase in malaria cases and increases in acute watery diarrhoea. In Sindh, one in every five health consultations have been for diarrhoeal disease while one in 10 patients have been treated for malaria.

Martin Griffiths, the UN’s under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs, said, “People in Pakistan are bearing the brunt of the climate crisis, where catastrophic flooding has taken a devastating toll on the most vulnerable. We are now in a race against time ahead of the winter season and funding is now urgently needed so humanitarians can prepare to respond to rising health, hunger, and other debilitating needs.”

Pakistan’s minister for economic affairs, Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, said that this catastrophe was a climate warning to the world at the expense of Pakistan.

1 <https://pakistan.un.org/en/202176-media-update-united-nations-pakistan-4-october-2022>

2 Sarkar S. Pakistan floods pose serious health challenges. *BMJ* 2022;378:doi: 10.1136/bmj.o2141.

3 Unicef. 2022. www.unicef.org/media/128291/file/Pakistan-Floods-SitRep-28-September-2022.pdf.