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ASIA

In Southern Pakistan, a Sea Made of Monsoon Waters Swallows Villages

Millions hit by a catastrophe that the country's officials have blamed on climate change

By **Saeed Shah** [Following](#) | *Photographs by Insiya Syed*

Updated Sept. 6, 2022 10:35 am ET

KHAIRPUR NATHAN SHAH, Pakistan—This used to be a thriving town of more than 300,000 people, surrounded by rice fields in southern Pakistan. Now it takes 40 minutes on a motor boat to reach Khairpur Nathan Shah.

The tops of tall houses, gas stations and factories poking out of the water now mark what is left of a town that has been swallowed up by a vast inland sea that emerged in recent days, as record monsoon rainfall accumulated in Sindh province. The inundated area is large enough to be visible from space, and some 200 miles long, NASA satellite images show.

This summer, Pakistan has seen rainfall three times the average—the United Nations secretary-general last week called it a “monsoon on steroids.” In the southern half of the country, it has been even worse.

Around Khairpur Nathan Shah, those unwilling to leave their property behind or too poor to survive elsewhere are marooned on those rooftops that remain above the water line. They are among the worst off among the millions hit by a catastrophe that Pakistani officials have blamed on climate change. It can take months to assess if climate change made a particular weather event more likely or more severe, but scientists have projected that warming temperatures could intensify episodes of extreme rainfall.

The normally arid southern region, one of the poorest parts of Pakistan, was hit hardest by this summer's monsoon, an annual downpour usually concentrated in the mountainous north. The rain that fell since mid-June in the two southern provinces, Sindh and Balochistan, is more than five times the average of the past 30 years, official data shows.

Khairpur Nathan Shah and surrounding villages were flooded suddenly one night last week when embankment defenses in the area gave way under the volume of water pushing against them, locals said. Water levels are still rising in the south of the country, days after

High Water

More than 30 million people in Pakistan have been affected by flood waters over an area of 33,000 square miles since flooding began in early August.

Satellite-detected water extents (July 1-Aug. 31)



Source: United Nations Satellite Center

the last major rains fell. Rainwater that had fallen on mountains of the adjacent province of Balochistan have arrived, officials said, forcing panicked residents to flee.

Mukhtar Ali said he ran from his village when the floods arrived, managing to grab two bags of flour. The rest of his food stores, which were enough for two to three months, were washed away.

“We had to decide whether we get our children out, or our beds or our food,” said Mr. Ali.

On Friday, Mehboob Chandio was among a group of men neck-deep in the murky, stagnant water filling Khairpur Nathan Shah’s main street. Mr. Chandio said they had waded through the waters for an hour, from their mostly submerged village just outside the town, to get to a shop on higher ground to buy food.

“The children and women in my village have no food, no water to drink. Please get something to them,” he shouted in reply to questions from a Wall Street Journal reporter aboard a small rescue boat run by the Edhi Foundation, a prominent Pakistani charity. He declined an offer from rescue workers to be pulled on board, saying: “We are staying to guard our possessions.”

Amid the calamity, thieves in boats are raiding homes at night, locals said. The poor cannot afford to leave behind their livestock and other assets, said residents, nor do they have the money needed to survive elsewhere. Some thought, wrongly, that their part of town would be safe, as it was in the last major floods of 2010. The waters are 12-feet deep in places, rescuers said.

“I’m a factory owner, not a beggar. But I’m nothing now,” Nasrullah Jamali, a man who had climbed atop a town monument sticking out of the water, said after he was pulled on board the boat. “The government has completely failed.”

Jam Khan Shoro, the irrigation minister in the provincial government of Sindh, said that an embankment designed to protect the area had been raised by 6 feet after the 2010 flood. But, he said, there was so much water that it went over the top of the embankment.

“We’ve never seen rain like this,” said Mr. Shoro, adding that it would take months for the pooled rainwater to drain away.

Zaheer Babar, director of the Pakistan Meteorological Department, said that normally, mountains and hills in the north of the country direct the monsoon waters into rivers, ultimately feeding into the Indus, which flows to the Arabian Sea.

“Sindh is a low-lying, flat area,” said Mr. Babar. “The water is stuck there.”



Officials in Sindh province said they were still focused on rescue operations and hadn’t been able to fully shift to providing aid.

Fields of rice, sugar cane, chilies and cotton have been washed away across Sindh. Wheat, the province’s next major crop, usually planted between September and December, now also looks at risk, officials say.

On Tuesday, Manchar Lake, south of Khairpur Nathan Shah, was overflowing so alarmingly from the inflow of rainwater that the nearby major town of Sehwan was threatened. Authorities said they had deliberately broken the lake’s banks in places to let out some water.

The U.N. said that based on satellite images, nearly 33,000 square miles appear to be affected by floodwaters as of Aug. 31, or more than 10% of the country, including over 21,000 square miles that appear to be croplands.

Across the country, more than 1,200 people have died and more than 30 million are affected, officials say, putting the disaster on the scale of the disastrous 2010 floods.

Officials in Sindh province said they were still focused on rescue operations, and hadn’t been able to fully turn to providing aid. Across the province, 6.5 million are homeless, according to the Sindh government.

At Khairpur Nathan Shah, power lines are in the water, or suspended just above the water line, a further obstacle to rescue efforts, though there is no electricity pulsing through them. There are snakes in the water, which have bitten children, rescuers say.

There isn't much help available even for those who reach land. Hundreds are living near the now-submerged village of Muhammad Yusuf Naich, where a few miles of higher ground remain. Some displaced families have erected makeshift shelters by stringing together tree branches or bamboo to form a frame and then stretching plastic sheeting over the top, to provide some shade from the punishing sunlight.



A wooden boat is brought on top of a truck to launch into the rising waters.



Families and their livestock take refuge on higher ground.

Rani, a woman who gave one name, fled Khairpur Nathan Shah to this dry patch, but four adults from her extended family are still there. She showed skin rashes, which she said came from contact with the water, while some of the family's children were running a fever.

"We are poor people. No one is providing us anything here," Rani said. "We are just sitting here under this intense sun."

On Saturday, the temperature in the area was nearly 97 degrees Fahrenheit, with humidity of 81%, according to the National Forecasting Weather Center in Islamabad. That combination of high heat and humidity is potentially fatal, scientists say.

In recent days, vans with food supplies from charities would arrive occasionally at the high ground where people had sought refuge. The vans were immediately mobbed by people desperate for aid.

The government has said it has provided cash handouts totaling \$90 million to 793,000 affected families nationwide. The army says it rescued more than 50,000 people, and provided medical help to over 60,000 people.

Still, Faisal Edhi, the head of the Edhi Foundation who spent nine days in the flooded areas, said most people affected hadn't received aid.

So far, 44 flights carrying aid from other countries, led by planes from Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, China and the U.N., have arrived, the Pakistani authorities have said. The U.S. has pledged \$30 million.

Ahsan Iqbal, the minister overseeing the flood response, said that rich countries, those most responsible historically for carbon emissions that have led to climate change, must do more. Mr. Iqbal said that the government would have to raise its initial estimates that the disaster had caused some \$10 billion of economic damage, given the losses of infrastructure, homes and crops.

"We are doing whatever is possible for us," said Mr. Iqbal, in an interview. "It is colossal damage, and much beyond Pakistan's resources."

Fida Hussain with his wife, Shakeela, and daughter, Noor Fatima, inside their makeshift home.

The residents of Muhammad Yusuf Naich can still see where their village stood, 50 yards from the higher ground where they retreated. The top of the village's brick houses, where the better-off lived, are visible. The mud homes dissolved.

Fida Hussain, who was visiting his village from the port city of Karachi when the floods came, had lived with his four brothers and their families in a mud home in the village. That home, built with aid after the 2010 floods, is now gone. He guesses it will cost the family more than \$2,000 to rebuild, or twice what he earns in a year as a parking lot attendant in the city.

"We ask for help from God," said Mr. Hussain. "What else can we do?"

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Appeared in the September 7, 2022, print edition as 'Floods Swallow Southern Pakistan Villages'.

