

IT IS THE PEOPLE OF PAKISTAN WHO ARE SUFFERING

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

In Sohbat Pur city, a district in Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province | Photo Credit: AP

Pakistan is facing a [severe crisis that is unprecedented](#). A third of its territory is under water, the death toll has crossed 1,400, and over 33 million people are suffering from the disruption caused by the flood. Two million acres of farmland are under water; [5,735 kilometres of transport links, and 1.6 million houses have been washed away](#), while 7,50,000 heads of livestock have been lost. According to the World Health Organisation, 6.4 million people need support, while 16 million children are in distress with 3.4 million of them needing 'life-saving' support, according to UNICEF. Water-borne diseases are spreading. The crisis, in retrospect, began on June 14, 2022. Sind and Balochistan experienced 784% and 500% more rain, respectively, according to Sherry Rehman, Minister of Climate Change. The Pakistani government failed to act promptly, and political leaders have not bothered to call for a ceasefire to their quarrels that prevent the government and society from giving their undivided attention to the catastrophe.

On August 26, 2022, Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif cut short his visit to Qatar and met with international organisations and a few governments including those of China, the United States and the United Kingdom. An amount of \$500 million was pledged, with the World Bank giving \$350 million and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), \$110 million.

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The obvious question is about what India has done and should have done. On August 29, 2022 Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted: 'Saddened to see the devastation caused by the floods in Pakistan. We extend our heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims, the injured and all those affected by this natural calamity and hope for an early restoration of normalcy.'

The Indian media has reported that the matter of sending aid to Pakistan has been under discussion and that Pakistan has not asked for help so far. The day Mr. Modi tweeted, Miftah Ismail, the Finance Minister of Pakistan, told the media that the government was thinking of re-opening road traffic with India. Till now, Pakistan has not declared its decision in the matter.

Pakistan often finds it difficult to formulate a policy on relations with India based on enlightened self-interest. The closure of road traffic following the change in the status of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019 was unnecessary posturing by Pakistan. How does it help the consumer in Pakistan to receive goods from India via Dubai? Was there any reason to hold that by closing the road India would reverse its decision? The Pakistan military that derives its immense political clout by inventing military threat from India will obviously oppose accepting aid from India. Even when there is a civilian government, the military has a major say on relations with India. It should be self-evident that a humanitarian act *per se* does not require any justification. Unfortunately, when it comes to Pakistan, India finds it difficult at times to do what is obviously right.

In private discussions, not many in Delhi are for sending aid to India's neighbour. The reasons vary. Some say that in 2010, when India offered help, Pakistan 'humiliated' us by insisting on routing it through the United Nations. Others say that India should wait for Pakistan to make a request.

Neither argument stands scrutiny. Why should we bear the baggage of 2010? Pakistan acted in a ridiculous manner then. Is it not equally ridiculous to let that act of Pakistan prevent us from doing what is right? When it comes to a humanitarian act, there is no need to wait for someone to beg. In any case, we should make a distinction between the government and the people of Pakistan. It is the people who are suffering.

The 17th century French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, conducted an interesting and intriguing thought experiment when he said: Cleopatra's nose, had it been shorter, the whole face of the world would have been changed.

Imagine a thought experiment: On August 27, 2022 when Ms. Sherry Rehman said that 30 million people had been affected, India announced its readiness to send 5,000 tons of vegetables, including tomatoes and onions, and medicines by road to Pakistan. Additionally, it was prepared to send a medical mission for children in distress. More aid could have been sent by sea to Karachi. India has through diplomatic channels even asked Pakistan to send a team to discuss the modalities.

Let us look at two possible scenarios: first, the Pakistan government rejects India's offer and finds itself in trouble with the people as the price of tomatoes (Pakistan rupee 500 per kilo), and onions (Pakistani rupee 400 per kilo) shoots up. Second, Pakistan accepts the offer, and the WFP, the World Bank, and other donors source relief material from India for obvious reasons to do with logistics. The Pakistan government has estimated that \$30 billion is needed for relief and rehabilitation. A good part of the material could be sourced from India. In conclusion, India should act without further delay. The United Nations Secretary General is likely to convene a conference of donors on assistance to Pakistan. India would find it awkward not to take part and it would be better for it to announce assistance before this. It is obvious that a humanitarian act can also be part of smart diplomacy. India as the major regional power in South Asia should act as one, able and willing to discharge its responsibilities as promptly as humanly possible.

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