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Pakistan, Drowning in Neglect

By ALI SETHI

Lahore, Pakistan

THE old man was sitting on his string bed. But it was upside down; its finely rounded legs were pointing to the sky, and the knotted ropes strung across its wooden frame were wet. Underneath it were several plastic drums — once used for storing diesel fuel — that had been emptied out and tied to it for buoyancy. The makeshift raft was bobbing up and down, and the man sitting on it had his legs in the yellow-brown water, which stretched around him for miles and miles like a strange sea, the tops of faraway trees sticking out of it like little islands.

“Hold it like that for five more minutes!” cried the cameraman.

I had accompanied a TV crew to this submerged village in the western Pakistani province of Baluchistan. The floodwater had dissolved the villagers’ mud houses, turned the rice fields they tilled into a lake and the road above into an embankment.

The villagers acted quickly: they set up temporary homes along the embankment, with two upright string beds for walls and a third thrown atop them like a roof. But the slits between the strings exposed the makeshift roofs, so the villagers filled these with the twisting branches of the ak plant, a kind of milkweed the women had plucked from the banks of a nearby canal. The plant’s tendrils now hung from their ceilings like flimsy chandeliers, with bees and flies dancing around the rotting bulbs.

“As you can see,” said the young reporter with the microphone in his hand, frowning at the camera in the harsh afternoon light, “these people have been living like this for three whole weeks.” His testimony was sent via satellite to the channel’s headquarters some 500 miles to the northeast in Lahore, and was airing live in the big cities and towns of Pakistan.

“Our grain is wet,” said a stocky old man with a henna-dyed beard. “It stinks.”

Another man said: “We have no clean water to drink. Our children are vomiting.”

“We need tents,” said the man with the red beard. “We were promised tents. But none have arrived.”

A sweating, bespectacled farmer who was standing behind the camera said that all the snakes had come out of the water and climbed into the trees. “In some places there are 20 snakes to a tree,” he said.

“Are they poisonous?” I asked.

“Oh, yes,” said the farmer, laughing at my question, which had prodded the deadly reality of his predicament. “Oh, yes.”

“Who did you vote for in the last election?” asked the reporter, and offered his microphone to a thin, bearded man who was standing next to his shack on the embankment.

The man named a landlord who was also the local politician.

“Will you vote for him again?”

“No, I will not.”

“Never again?”

“Never again.”

“You heard him,” said the reporter, reclaiming the microphone and looking defiantly into the camera. “He says he will not vote for the same politician, who has done nothing to help his constituents in this desperate time.”

A few hours later, when we had retired to a rest house in town, our TV crew got a call from a bureaucrat. He had been criticized in our transmission and was calling to say that he was sick — an explanation for his absence from the scene of the flood. The crew politely offered to interview him at his house. “But I am at the doctor’s right now,” he pleaded.

The next phone call came from the office of the landlord-politician whose tenants we had interviewed. The big man himself was in another city, but a staff member was calling to insist that his men had been helping the displaced people. There were just so many of them right now; would we meet him in a few hours at a relief camp in the town? He would like to offer his explanation there.

We weren’t satisfied. We had been sent here to break a big story and make a big difference — all the big TV channels of Pakistan had sent out their crews to interrogate the victims’

elected representatives — and here we had two late, paltry excuses, both relayed by telephone, both issuing from the still-invisible officials of a famously corrupt local government.

We agreed to meet the man at the relief camp. We were scheduled to do another transmission at night, and hoped that in it we would confront him with the complaints and demands of the villagers his boss had abandoned.

But we never got the chance.

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At dusk, just as we were heading to the relief camp, a police officer called from the nearby town of Dera Allahyar. “It’s an emergency,” he said. “Please come to my office right away.”

His office glowed at the end of a lightless road, a large whitewashed building with low outer walls and a long driveway — an eerie reminder in this desolate province of the British-colonial pretensions (and origins) of Pakistan’s omnipresent bureaucracy. Inside, through a slender corridor with high ceilings, we were led to the officer’s room: he was sitting at his desk in the soundless, air-conditioned cold, a plump, uniformed man with perfect black hair and mustache, an enormous, highly detailed map of the district hanging on the wall beside him. “The water is coming this way,” he said wretchedly, his elbow on the desk, his plump hand on his brow.

We sat in the chairs arranged around his desk.

There was a highway, he explained, on a berm above the fields and towns nearby, that ran on the border between Baluchistan and Sindh Province to the south. On the Sindhi side lived a land-owning politician who wanted to cut a hole in the highway that would divert the water to this very town. The politician was claiming that he needed to protect Jacobabad, an important small city on his side of the highway, though he was obviously trying to save his 400 acres of rice fields.

“When will he divert the water?” I asked.

“Now,” said the police officer. “He’s trying to breach the highway right now.”

But it was late at night, and the 200,000 people of the area’s towns and villages were sleeping.

“How will you alert your people?” I asked.

He said: “We will have to make announcements from the loudspeakers of mosques. We have no other way.”

A gray-haired man wearing a traditional shalwar kameez came into the room — the civil commissioner — and together the two men made a string of phone calls to their subordinates, announcing the emergency and ordering the evacuation of houses.

The police officer hung up the phone and said he was going to the highway to stop the breach.

“Can we come with you?” I asked.

“That is not advisable,” he said. There were soldiers on the highway, and they wouldn’t want to be on camera. What were soldiers doing on the highway?

The answer came in evasive, fragmented sentences: there was an airbase on the Sindhi side of the highway. This was where the military’s newest F-16 fighter jets were parked. But local residents believed that the base also housed the notorious American drones used to kill Islamist militants in the mountains. If true, this meant that the military was getting tens of millions of dollars a year in exchange, none of which trickled down to the local population.

The armed forces were going to save the base at all costs, he explained. But they didn’t want to draw attention to their own role — or to their interest — in the diversion of the water. Hence the presence of the land-owning politician; if there was any fallout, he would take the blame, and the soldiers would appear to have acted on his personal wishes.

The commissioner and then the police officer departed for the highway, leaving our TV crew behind in the room. Could we break the story we had just heard?

“I don’t think so,” said one reporter. “You don’t want the intelligence agencies to come after you.” The last time he had broken such a story, he said, a whole team of officers from the feared Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence had come to see him in his office.

Another said, with sudden formality, “It is considered unpatriotic to criticize the security forces.”

“We can release some information,” suggested the first reporter. “We can say the highway is being breached. At least we can alert people that way.”

The others agreed, and he rushed out to the driveway to set up his equipment in the van. After some minutes he returned; the news bulletin had gone through. Now we had nothing to do, and after waiting another hour we decided to go back to the rest house.

But the policeman called: he wanted us to come to the highway after all. "People have brought out their guns," he said. "Please come quickly."

We sped toward the highway, our headlights illuminating the stark figures moving in the other direction on the road: herds of swaying buffalo, barefoot men and women urging them on with sticks and switches. Behind them were donkeys and cows pulling rickety wooden carts laden with goats, chickens, children, tin trunks and sacks of grain. Some of them had been traveling for days — the jutting ribs of the unfed animals showed even in the night — while others had just heard the evacuation warning on the loudspeakers of their mosques and had decided to flee the water, though they had nowhere to go.

We reached the wedge-shaped breach in the highway. It was incomplete; the water was still on the Sindh side. The police officer was standing next to the breach, but there was no landlord, no soldiers.

What had happened?

The policeman said that when he arrived the landlord and an army major were standing on the highway and supervising the giant excavators making the breach. But the policeman and his commissioner had pleaded with them to stop. And another tribal chieftain-turned-politician from an endangered village on the dry side had appeared with his armed guards and joined the commotion.

"It was turning into a fight between the provinces," said the policeman darkly. "But then, I asked the major, 'Are you from the Pakistani army or the Sindh army?' And that shook him. He understood what I was saying. He apologized and withdrew the excavators."

That was oddly simple. Was that all it took to deter the powerful military — a reminder of its theoretical neutrality in political matters? Or had the major detected a threat in the policeman's words?

There was no one left to ask.

"Would you like to start your transmission?" said the police officer.

And so the camera came out again, and the police officer spoke softly and humbly into the microphone, surrounded by the evidence of his unlikely victory. The direction and levels of

the floodwater were mentioned; the conniving landlord and his rice fields were mentioned. But the soldiers and the airbase — still mysterious and forbidding — were not.

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In the morning, we were told to get out of the town.

The soldiers had made the breach after all: but in another location, and quietly, without arousing suspicion.

The water was on its way.

In one place our car ran into the flood. It was swallowing the road. There was another way out — a six-hour drive west to the city of Quetta. Unfortunately, Baluch separatists had struck: they were stopping vehicles, pulling out Punjabi passengers and shooting them. Most of the men in our crew weren't Punjabis, and they took that route. But I am a Punjabi, as are two of the reporters, and we had to find another way.

The highway again, the vehicles on it now stranded for a full mile. There were people on tractors and trucks and the wooden carts we had seen the night before; many more were going by foot. A bloated dead buffalo was lying on its side in the dust, and a skinny dog was frantically tearing out its stomach.

Bent children with grain sacks on their backs rushed past it. A blind woman, holding the hand of a little girl, was trying to find her family, scraping her one free hand along the forms and shapes she passed. A blinkered donkey could no longer pull the load it was carrying — the salvaged possessions of just one family — and its thin legs were shaking uncontrollably. Behind it was a tractor carrying several families; and behind that was a truck carrying many more.

The water rose smoothly and steadily beneath the highway, spilling from one field into the next, claiming house after house. At some point in the night, when the water around us was no longer visible, a group of shouting men appeared with sticks and rifles and forcibly cleared up the traffic jam. The trucks and tractors ahead of us began to move. And then our car got out.

I don't know if the animals or the people on carts behind us made it in time.

FOR days now I have been trying to call some of the people I met in Dera Allahyar. But their phones aren't working. The area around the highway is under 16 feet of water. Dozens of people have drowned, and at least 21 people have died from gastroenteritis in the last three

days alone, with hundreds of thousands stranded on the dry land that remains. In some places the military has set up functioning relief camps. But the people's needs far exceed the aid at hand.

The airbase came up last week when the country's health minister told a parliamentary committee that it was "controlled by the Americans." But the military rejected the story right away: the base is used for Pakistani aircraft only, said one senior official, and Americans come there only to impart technical training for the F-16s.

The story has died, and the image of Pakistan's military as the sole protector of its people is whole again, with all those videos of soldiers rescuing people from the water playing endlessly on TV screens. At least two high-profile politicians have asked for a military "intervention" to relieve the country of its inefficient civilian rulers.

The Western media's coverage of the flood, meanwhile, is dominated by fears of Islamic charities with militant wings. Here, too, the implication is the same — Pakistanis are unable to govern themselves — and dovetails with the emerging demand for a strongman.

But there is at least one other way of looking at the country revealed by this natural disaster. This is a place where peasants drown in rice fields they don't own, where mud-and-brick villages are submerged to save slightly less expendable towns, and where dying villages stand next to airbases housing the most sophisticated fighter jets in the world. Such a country is owed more than just aid, it is owed nothing less than reparations from all those who preside over its soil.

This includes politicians and bureaucrats, who are already being brought to account by a rambunctious electronic media, but also an unaccountably powerful military and its constant American financiers, who together stand to lose the most when the next wave comes.

Ali Sethi is the author of the novel "The Wish Maker."