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U.S. Strategy in Pakistan Is Upended by Floods

By **MARK LANDLER**

WASHINGTON — The floods in **Pakistan** have upended the Obama administration's carefully honed strategy there, confronting the United States with a vast humanitarian crisis and militant groups determined to exploit the misery, in a country that was already one of its thorniest problems.

While the administration has kept its public emphasis on the relief effort, senior officials are busy assessing the longer-term strategic impact. One official said the disaster would affect virtually every aspect of the relationship between the United States and Pakistan, and could have ripple effects on the war in Afghanistan and the broader American battle against **Al Qaeda**.

With Pakistan's economy suffering a grievous blow, the administration could be forced to redirect parts of its \$7.5 billion economic aid package for Pakistan to urgent needs like rebuilding bridges, rather than more ambitious goals like upgrading the rickety electricity grid.

Beyond that, the United States will be dealing with a crippled Pakistani government and a military that, for now, has switched its focus from rooting out insurgents to plucking people from the floodwaters. The Pakistani authorities, a senior American official said, have been "stretched to the breaking point" by the crisis. Their ragged response has fueled fears that the **Taliban** will make gains by stepping in to provide emergency meals and shelter.

"It certainly has security implications," said another official who, like others interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss internal policy deliberations. "An army that is consumed by flood relief is not conducting counterinsurgency operations."

On Thursday, the **United Nations** will convene a special meeting devoted to the floods, hoping to galvanize what has been a lackluster global response. Secretary of State **Hillary**

Rodham Clinton is expected to announce that American public aid has surpassed \$100 million, an official said.

“We’re obviously not oblivious to the political and strategic implications of this catastrophe, but right now, we are fully focused on the emergency relief effort and trying to get a good assessment of the needs,” said the administration’s special representative to the region, **Richard C. Holbrooke**.

Noting that several weeks remain in the monsoon season, Mr. Holbrooke said, “Worse may be yet to come.”

The disaster comes after a period in which the administration seemed to have made strides in repairing the American relationship with Pakistan. Mrs. Clinton visited Islamabad in July with a long list of pledges, including the upgrading of several power plants and a plan to promote Pakistani mangoes. Now, these projects seem almost beside the point.

“Before, there were power plants in need of refurbishment,” said **Daniel S. Markey**, senior fellow for India, Pakistan and South Asia at the **Council on Foreign Relations**. “Now there are power plants underwater.”

In recent days, the United States has sent 15 helicopters, rescuing nearly 6,000 people. On Wednesday, military cargo planes delivered 60,000 pounds of food and other relief supplies, bringing total deliveries to 717,000 pounds. The speed and scale of the effort, officials in both countries said, have helped bolster the checkered American image in Pakistan.

In another hopeful sign, officials said Pakistan and India had been in close touch about the floodwaters, some of which are flowing into Pakistan from India. Such communication, between historic archenemies, could augur reduced tension in other areas, one of the officials said.

Against that, however, are the staggering dimensions of the disaster. A senior Pakistani official told the administration on Tuesday that the next flood surge was likely to inundate much of Punjab, the densely populated region that borders India and produces much of Pakistan’s food.

So far, this official said, the greatest damage has been in regions that are also hotbeds for Islamic insurgents, which has set back the army’s fight against extremist groups. Local governments in those places have largely collapsed, leaving the army as the only source of authority.

With 20 million people displaced from their homes, the Pakistani authorities are girding themselves for an immense migration to the major cities, which they fear could sow further instability.

“Americans have not yet registered the enormity of the crisis,” Pakistan’s ambassador to the United States, [Husain Haqqani](#), said in a telephone interview from Islamabad, the capital.

Pakistani and American officials said reports of hard-line Islamic charities providing relief were exaggerated. One pointed out that the floods had hurt the insurgents as well: there was a report of small arms and ammunition belonging to a militant group floating in the water.

Still, people in both countries warned that if rebuilding and rehabilitation efforts bogged down, the Taliban and other militant groups would try to take advantage of it. “The real test is, can their government provide the most fundamental services?” said an administration official.

Parallels to this crisis are hard to find. One official cited the example of the Indonesian province of Aceh, which had been racked by a three-decade insurgency fought by the separatist Free Aceh Movement. After the tsunami swept through in 2004, killing 170,000 people, the separatists and the Indonesian government quickly signed a peace treaty, in August 2005.

There are, however, big differences between a localized separatist group and an international jihadist movement.

“If the flood proves to tilt the balance of power in Pakistan, it’s more likely to tilt toward the militants than toward the government,” said Bruce Riedel, a former intelligence official who helped the administration formulate its initial policy for Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Already, Pakistan’s president, [Asif Ali Zardari](#), has been exposed to withering criticism at home for going on a trip to Europe during the early days of the flood. American officials said they were determined not to get drawn into the dispute, noting that in any event, Mr. Zardari had been stripped of many of his powers in a recent constitutional change.

Decisions on how the flood will affect American economic aid may be influenced by a trip to Pakistan by Senator [John Kerry](#), the Massachusetts Democrat who co-sponsored the five-year nonmilitary assistance package with Senator [Richard G. Lugar](#), Republican of Indiana.

Senator Kerry, accompanied by Dan Feldman, a deputy to Mr. Holbrooke, is scheduled to tour the flooded areas on Thursday. Mr. Kerry has said he is open to redirecting aid money,

though some analysts said they were skeptical that Congress would approve additional financing. Military aid may also come under scrutiny, according to administration officials.

“Every dimension of our relationship — politics, economics, security — is going to see major shifts as a result of this historic disaster,” said Lt. Gen. [Douglas Lute](#), the White House coordinator for Afghanistan and Pakistan. “All the tools of diplomacy have to be examined in light of this new reality.”