

“The floods have revealed the real nature of poverty in Pakistan”

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An interview with Farooq Tariq, member of CADTM Pakistan, Labour Relief Campaign (LRC) and spokesperson for Labour Party Pakistan (LPP)- Lahore, 11 October 2010.

Stéphanie Jacquemont (SJ): The Labour Relief Campaign, which comprises various organizations including CADTM Pakistan, is now helping communities that have been hit by the floods. Can you tell us more about the situation for people living in the flood-affected areas?

Farooq Tariq (FT): This has been the most devastating flood in the history of Pakistan. Twenty million people have been affected, and there are still thousands of people on the roads because their houses have been destroyed. Agriculture has also suffered large-scale damage.

This disaster has revealed the real nature of poverty in Pakistan. Earlier, the government was claiming that poverty was on the decline, that the poverty alleviation schemes were working well, that Pakistan had not been impacted by the world capitalist crisis, etc.

Now all these claims made during Musharraf's dictatorship and the present civilian government have been swept bare by the floods, leaving a picture of people living in absolute poverty. We have seen people forced to abandon their homes with just a donkey cart, a suitcase, a few clothes, a few pots – nothing more! The total assets of these families amount to less than a few hundred rupees. For the first time, peasants from backward, feudal areas have appeared in the mainstream media, and these peasants have told the world just how dire and how widespread is poverty in Pakistan.

It was in this context that the Labour Relief Campaign started its work on 26 July, when the floods were just beginning. There were torrential rains, so we immediately consulted with each other and set up a camp in Lahore to collect money. The LRC was established in October 2005, after the earthquake. At that time, we were the first to go on the streets to raise funds in Lahore. Over 100,000 people lost their lives in the earthquake, which hit the Kashmir and Northern regions. In the case of the floods, the scale of destruction is much higher, with almost all four provinces affected. It is estimated that damage caused by the 2010 flood is greater than the combined effects of the 2004 tsunami and the earthquakes in Haiti and Pakistan.

The response from civil society organizations is not the one we expected, but we in Lahore were the first to come out on the streets to collect money. We have now raised 16 million rupees (more than 130,000 euros) and we are working in the four provinces of Pakistan. The money we are raising comes not only from Pakistan. International groups, and friends from all over the world contacted us and gave money for this natural disaster, which of course is also a man-made disaster.

SJ: What kind of projects are you financing on the spot? Are they only short-term relief actions or are you also involved in longer-term projects?

FT: The campaign has two sides. Immediately, during the first week of heavy rains when the flooding began to destroy roads, bridges and other infrastructures, we organized a press conference in Lahore on debt. Our demand was that Pakistan should say no to foreign debt. Journalists were curious but they gave the subject very poor coverage at the time. We did not lose heart, and went on with the campaign for debt cancellation.

The campaign on debt cancellation is still going on. Here is what we have done so far in Lahore: first a press conference, then a multi-party conference [1], then another press conference, then a rally in Lahore, then yesterday again a press conference. And now I see from the coverage of yesterday's press conference that we have been taken seriously by some of the English-language media. Urdu papers are still far behind in understanding the whole issue, but I think some journalists have understood. Having lead stories in the papers gives us tremendous support.

So from the beginning, LRC took up the issue of debt alongside the immediate relief work. As far as relief is concerned, we provided clothes, food, medicines and transport for those leaving their homes, as well as rehabilitation in some places. We do not want to confine ourselves to providing food and clothes, but are trying to provide people with sustainable assistance for the future: we are thinking cooperatives in agriculture, building houses and community houses. That phase is going on (discussions are taking place, surveys are being carried out) but there are still decisions to be taken.

One more thing: distribution of food and clothes was very poorly managed by many organizations. Relief items were thrown at disaster victims as if they were beggars asking for money. We were totally opposed to such practices. We wanted to provide help with dignity. Our local teams (from LPP, the Labour Education Foundation, Women Workers Helpline, the National Trade Union Federation) conducted on-site surveys, thanks to which we were able to provide assistance in conditions of dignity and respect.

One of the main issues was how to carry out distribution in a situation where great hunger sometimes drove people to attack the relief convoys. There were riots in some areas, trucks were looted, etc. We said that distribution had to go on in spite of this. The fact is that the government did not provide an adequate infrastructure for proper distribution of aid. We have had to be very careful on this count, and so far, no incident of looting or attack has been reported. In one place in the Pashtun area, there were people collecting the relief items and not distributing them. They were hoarding ten trucks full of goods. Some of those awaiting aid informed members of our relief committee, and we sent people and policeman to recover the relief items, and managed to distribute them all. _ Yesterday I saw on TV that fruit sent to flood victims is being sold in the markets. So there are people making a profit out of this. However, our committee has proved effective in distributing the relief items and getting them to the deserving sections of the population.

SJ: One more question about relief: what is the relationship between the military, the government, and organizations engaged in providing relief assistance on the spot? Do they work together? Is the government helping the organizations to provide assistance?

FT: One of the main complaints we heard everywhere in the first three or four weeks was "Where is the government?", because people were left to fend for themselves. Feudal lords abandoned their peasants. They diverted water and broke dams so that their own land would not be affected and other people would suffer the consequences.

The government was invisible throughout this whole episode. It failed to take events seriously in the

beginning and only came forward when it was too late. The President of Pakistan went on a seven-day picnic: he stayed for three days in Paris in one of the big palaces that he and his family owns; he was provided with a helicopter by the government to go to his residence. Then he spent a few days in Britain. There were a lot of complaints about this lack of concern. Comrades in the UK also demonstrated in Birmingham.

In the meantime, the military, which ruled Pakistan for 33 out of the last 63 years, seized this opportunity to regain their lost credibility. They implemented some actions, and put their effective propaganda machinery in motion, providing films and news items to all the private print and electronic media, to show how good the army is. This was not really about the military helping, but rather about the military regaining its prestige. The army was also involved in cases of nepotism, meaning that those who knew army officers were helped first, and so on. Then the government started plans for rehabilitation, and also distributed "Watan cards" to some of the flood-affected people: with this card, you go to a bank and get 25,000 rupees (i.e. about 210 euros). There were complaints about bribery by some public sector institutions.

The government is providing some help, but there is no relief coordination between the military, the government and civil society organizations. There is a lack of trust between the various parties. We don't want to work with the military. I think the military should do relief work, because it is their duty and they are paid for it. But they should not be making it an opportunity for propaganda. What else have they done, apart from ruling Pakistan? It is not for self-promotion that the military should help.

The civilian government has also failed to meet the expectations of the people. They have failed to make changes: it is business as usual! Rich politicians continue to enjoy their luxurious lifestyle; they have done nothing to channel funds for the victims. They are now talking about a flood tax, so that the ones who have not been affected can also suffer! They are also talking about (and already implementing) cuts in the development budget. The development budget is the last priority, while they have given several hundred billion rupees to the military for services provided to flood victims. The military budget has been increased, the development budget has been reduced and they are taking on new loans. So the government is really off track. They have not instituted any pro-people policies; they are still pleasing the IMF and the World Bank; they are still pleasing the capitalists and the feudals, and they are losing credibility.

SJ: How do you think the debt issue will be managed by the government? Do you think they will comply with the IMF's demands regarding tax reforms, elimination of subsidies to the energy sector, etc.?

FT: The IMF and the World Bank put pressure on the government for the last loan negotiation and they are doing it again. They have provided only \$3 billion to the government of Pakistan in the form of loans with conditionalities: they have asked for a reform in the energy sector (which is in fact a counter-reform), they have forced the government to cut public spending, and they want it to introduce a flood tax. Even the US government has said "If you don't raise funds within the country, how can we help you?". There is a lot of pressure to raise taxes. We are in favour of taxing the rich, no doubt about that! Rich politicians are in power and their main business is politics, meaning that politics is a means for them to earn money, to make them richer and richer. Why would they attack their own class by taxing their own class? So whatever tax is introduced, it will be indirect, it will be borne by the masses, not by the rich. They don't want the rich to pay for the flood. They have allowed the import of luxury products from abroad; there is no agriculture tax in Pakistan so the feudal lords who run 30% of the economy pay no tax; the Prime Minister pays just a few thousand rupees each year.

In short, IMF and the World Bank are pushing, the US administration is pushing, and the government is bending. Our efforts are concentrated on putting a people's agenda first, and to pressurizing the government to stop taking this route. CADTM Pakistan, a small group so far, has endeavoured to make its voice heard, and the LRC and political parties (LPP, Workers' Party) have come together on this question. For the first time in the history of Pakistan, the debt question is being debated in the mainstream media. It used to be a "no-go" area, just like the military budget - debt servicing and military budget being the largest budget items. Now, both issues are being questioned, thanks to our efforts in writing articles, leafleting, organizing events, and raising more awareness on the question. We will not let the government go on like this. We will do our best, in whatever way possible. What we have to say is very simple: we have no money, how can we pay? There's not much argument on this score. The flood has affected our economy, we have no money. We also say that this debt has already been paid back - what about two hundred years of exploitation and colonization? So we have to address both the colonial debt and the odious debt. We present these arguments in a very simple manner, and we make it absolutely clear when we say that Pakistan should not pay the debt, it should not allow the present government to fill its pockets and feed corruption. If we succeed in forcing cancellation of debt, we will be able to force our rulers to spend money on the people's needs instead. If we are successful, we will not let our rulers spend the money in the usual fashion. It is not our task to make our rulers happy, but to force them to spend money on the flood-affected population.

SJ: Are you confident about popular mobilization? With such a high level of inflation, with these hikes in food prices, things surely cannot go on like this for long. People will go on the streets. What is your opinion about this?

FT: Pakistan is not an ordinary civilian democratic country. We have problems with religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalists enjoy grassroots support, they have a lot of resources at their disposal, they still receive charity money from Pakistan and from abroad also. It is true that there is anger against the government, but who will benefit the most? Will this anger be channelled through the fundamentalist organizations or through organizations like ours?

Fundamentalist organizations are also active in relief work. They have raised a lot of money. They have deep historic roots in Pakistan. The State is a religious State (one of our demands is to separate religion from the State) and right-wing ideas are widespread. So we are worried that fundamentalists may take advantage of this anger. To undermine their influence, we are trying to build working class and peasant movements, asking for land rights, trade-union rights, wage increases, etc. The only way to fight the rise of fundamentalism is to build class-based movements. This campaign against debt repayment was not launched by the fundamentalist groups; it started with us, the progressive movements. We have been able to mobilize many other groups around us, but we intentionally did not invite the religious parties. We are doing our best to show which groups are behind this campaign. We have put up thousands of posters in Lahore, our "tanga march" [\[2\]](#) starts today, and so on.

To sum up, I would say our work in the field is double-edged: we promote our political ideas, and at the same time we use this promotion to counteract the influence of religious fundamentalism. We keep this constantly in mind. Regarding popular mobilization, I think the people of Pakistan will stand up and fight back. They are fighting back to a large extent in many areas, though not necessarily in a well-organized manner. They are very much under the influence of the rich politicians, but this flood has its own politics. This was a political flood because it was dealt with politically, I mean that rich politicians used the floods to save themselves. So people have seen through this manoeuvre by rich politicians. The floods are one of the major incidents in our country's history, and major events and incidents shape people's consciousness. This flood has affected, to some extent, the people's already diluted consciousness concerning religion and rich politicians, and

some people are becoming class-conscious as well. We are trying to promote that consciousness through our initiatives, and we have found many friends thanks to this campaign. For us, helping the flood-affected people is not just about helping them with immediate relief but also about liberating them from the influence of religious fundamentalism and rich politicians.

P.S.

* Text edited by Judith Harris. Posted on CADTM website:
<http://www.cadtm.org/Farooq-Tariq-The-floods-have>

Footnotes

[1] See [Pakistan: Multi Party Conference against debt repayments](#) and [Political parties and civil society organisations demand debt cancellation, resolve to launch mass movement to refuse debt](#)

[2] Tangas are horse-drawn carts and a typical Pakistani means of transport. From 10 to 14 October, activists went all over Lahore in tangas with leaflets and loudspeakers to raise awareness of the debt issue and explain the demand for debt cancellation.