

Flood-hit southern Punjab continues to live in misery

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Everyone I meet is angry with the government. The government has announced Rs. 25 000 for every family hit by floods. But that is not enough to build even one room. To receive this grant one must also have the so-called Watan Card and in order to get that you must be able to identify yourself with an ID card. Many have lost their ID cards in the floods...

The horn of the small minibus is hoarse by now and my scribbling in my note-pad is difficult to read. During hours long journey, it was impossible to write properly with a shaky hand, made to tremble all the time by a bumpy road. The roads leading to the villages outside Muzafargarh, in southern Punjab -washed away by flash floods last year-- have not been rebuilt yet.

As we leave the town, large, full mango trees are lining the road until they are replaced by deeply green wheat fields and sugar cane fields spread as far as one can see. It is harvest time. Trucks and tractors that are filled both vertically and horizontally with sugar canes drive slowly down the roads. As they roll through the smaller cities, the children run alongside the trucks to pull out a sugar cane and suck on it like a giant lollipop.

At first it is hard to imagine a flood in this area. The river of Chenab is not even half full in the beginning of March. But large tent cities and make shift houses, donated by various aid organizations, remind one of the great catastrophe. Fact is that this area does not usually flood during the yearly monsoon rains between June and August. But last year the floods wrought havoc on lives, property, food, fields and crops in the largest environmental catastrophe in the country's history.

After 13 years of draught without enough rain and almost completely dried out rivers, this region was lashed by heavy monsoon. Muzafargarh and the nearby villages lie between the rivers of Indus and Chenab. Since it is more than 40 kilometers to the Indus, the farmers here did not prepare themselves for floods, as opposed to the farmers living in the proximity to rivers and who have learnt how to deal with floods: they build houses on hills and grow sugar canes which endures floods better than, for example, wheat crop.

Nasim, who works for the NGO Pattan, sits with me on the back seat and almost hits her head when the mini-bus drives up and down the mud patches called roads. She is dressed in the traditional Shalwar Kamiz, that most women wear in Pakistan. It is pink toned, as is her sunglasses and eye shadow. We are on our way to the village of Taar Poor and Nasim is going to hold a meeting with the women - a workshop in empowerment and participation in decision-making as the families have now begun to rebuild their houses. A few sewing machines have also been loaded onto the minibus. Pattan hands them out to women who have lost their machines which they earlier used for earning money.

Before we leave Multan, she should draw money from First Women Bank. Anyone can keep an

account at the bank, but all the employees at the bank are women.

There are numerous women and children at the meeting in the village and everyone says that women were hardest hit by the floods since it is them taking care of home, family and children.

"It was hard for us, very hard. Especially the life in the camps. And we had to take special care of our younger daughters in the camps so nothing would happen to them and they would not be harassed", a woman in a white scarf says.

"But our husbands trust us more now and we are participating more. They saw how strong we were during the catastrophe, we women were actually the strongest", says another woman wearing a black niqab.

The villagers fled 30-40 kilometers by foot from Taar Poor when the floods began to hit their village. They ended up in camps, living for months under the tents. Already after a few weeks, when the water had withdrawn, they returned for various chores but continued to live in the camps. Most of the houses have been reduced to facades and the tents have been erected inside the outer walls where the rooms, kitchens and toilets once were. Animals crowd together with people.

No one affords to rebuild a devastated house. The government has announced Rs. 25 000 for every family hit by floods. But that is not enough to build even one room. To receive this grant one must also have the so-called Watan Card and in order to get that you must be able to identify yourself with an ID card. Many have lost their ID cards in the floods. In fact, many here in the countryside never registered themselves ever in the first place. They are now stuck and cannot get a share of the government's small grant.

Everyone I meet is angry with the government. In this area the flood could have been avoided if the large land owners, or the "feudal class" as the peasants here call them, had not directed the water from the Indus through the smaller rivers to save their fields where almost no one lives.

"This is a man made flood", most people say.

Mohammed Baksh looks like he is over 80 years old, but insists that he is only 40. He is wearing the traditional peasants' clothes of this area and two different sandals on his feet. He shows me the façade of his house and invites me to the back through a door that falls down with a big thud when he tries to open it. Inside his wife Mai Karimo sits. She can hardly walk and has one single tooth in her mouth. She complains that she is ill and needs medicine, but it is not possible to get any health care nearby. She, as well as her husband, are sad and lives with relatives in a tent.

"We have to walk 10 kilometers to get here everyday, but I do it. Because this is my land. We are waiting for someone to rebuild our house. We are not happy", she says as Mohammed Baksh simultaneously fills in.

We travel to the next village, and the next village. Same stories and destinies everywhere. And the same gatherings to tell about the feudal class and the government's responsibility in creating the catastrophe.

Everybody wants to talk and tell about his or her situation. As soon as I stop tens of villagers gather around with their stories. And I witness a poverty I have never seen before in my life.

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P.S.

* From Viewpoint Online.

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/flood-hit-southern-punjab-continues-to-live-in-misery.html>

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* Translated from Swedish by Linn Hjort.