

As Pakistan flood worsens, US hand in recovery expands

USAID said Monday that it will send heavy-duty plastic to provide temporary housing for more than 140,000 victims of the Pakistan flood. A robust US effort could help thwart Taliban influence.



A Pakistani flood affected woman heads back to her tent after getting relief food at a camp in Nowshera, northwest Pakistan on Monday.

(Mohammad Sajjad/AP)

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posted August 9, 2010 at 4:18 pm EDT

Washington —

Pakistan's monsoon flooding has affected 14 million people in an ongoing crisis that is threatening more people than this year's Haiti earthquake and the 2004 Indonesian tsunami combined, say international disaster experts.

With that in mind, the US is racing to provide basic human needs, like makeshift housing, in the an area that has also become the epicenter in the global battle with militant Islam.

While its first priority in helping flood victims may be humanitarian, how the US responds could help thwart the spread of the Taliban and other extremist groups in Pakistan, some US officials and regional experts say.

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) announced Monday that enough heavy-duty plastic sheeting to provide emergency housing for more than 140,000 flood victims would begin arriving later this week.

Previously, the US announced \$35 million in emergency assistance to Pakistan in the wake of a disaster that Pakistani government officials describe as "beyond imagination" and setting the country back years if not decades.

Mindful that the Taliban and other extremist organizations will be anxious to fill a void left by an unprepared government, the US is carefully noting at each announcement of additional assistance that the US effort is being conducted in full cooperation with Pakistani authorities.

"We are working in support of the relief effort of the Pakistani government and together with the humanitarian community to quickly provide aid to those in need," said Mark Ward, acting director of USAID's Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance, on

Monday.

But privately, US officials are expressing dismay over what many see as a slow response and lack of preparedness by Pakistan's civilian authorities. In their own defense, Pakistani officials claim to be dealing with a crisis surpassing the dimensions of the 2005 earthquake in Kashmir.

On a visit to the Pakistani city of Multan Monday, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said the "magnitude" of the floods was "immense" and "hard to assess," although he did call the disaster the worst in the country's history. Pakistan was created in 1947.

Some South Asia experts say that while the aim behind the US coordination with the Pakistani government's efforts may be understandable, it also inevitably puts the US in close association with a government that is not held in high regard by the Pakistani public.

"Too much of the time, US aid has ended up siphoned off into the coffers of corrupt officials, and the people most in need are aware of it," says Malou Innocent, a specialist in US Afghanistan-Pakistan policy at the Cato Institute in Washington.

Another problem for the US is that US policy in the region – from the US military presence in Afghanistan to years of close association with Pakistan's military rulers – is unpopular with the public, she says, and that is "not about to be washed away by relief aid, no matter how much it is."

As a result, Ms. Innocent says the US should provide substantial emergency assistance especially given the scale of the disaster, but not with the idea of killing two birds with one stone.

"Providing this aid should not be conflated with the aim of repairing America's image in Pakistan, when the reason for that problem is the public's basic disagreement with US policy in the Muslim world," says Innocent, who says the large US military presence in the region is causing more problems than it is solving. "All the aid in the world can't make up for bad policy."

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