

# How Sindh province is still struggling to recover after Pakistan's devastating floods

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**In this particularly poor area of south-east Pakistan, several towns and villages are still under water nearly three months after the monsoon rains this summer which caused widespread and massive flooding. As Mediapart's Nejma Brahim reports from the province, poverty and illness are rife among those left homeless, some of whom feel abandoned to their fate.**

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Submerged fields stretch as far as the eye can see, with refugees living in makeshift camps on every scrap of land available on the outskirts of stricken villages. Since the [terrible floods](#) three months ago the roads of Sindh province in south-east Pakistan have resembled a scene from a disaster movie; entire villages have been covered in water, inhabitants have drowned, crops have been destroyed and millions of displaced persons, who were forced to flee their homes as the floodwaters advanced, have lost all or nearly of their personal belongings and are mired in deep poverty.

A few miles from Qazi Ahmed, a small town in the north of the province, Nour Hatoun's family is trying to survive in the middle of the polluted water, surrounded by the animals they tend; goats and cattle that a farmer left them to look after for a few hundred roubles (fewer than five dollars). "That's our house," she says, pointing her finger and adjusting the green and pink headscarf that covers her hair. "It's completely destroyed, we've lost everything," she continues. "Even our animals died in the floods."

Still encircled by the water, a part of the house is now starting to re-emerge. As women from the camp point out the presence of snakes, the outline of a little girl appears in the distance, around 50 yards away. She is crossing the 'lake' that now covers her ancestors' land as best she can, a baby in her arms. "Just after the floods the water level was so high that we couldn't take anything with us. As soon as we could we went and found these two beds," recalls Nour Hatoun's husband, who describes how he saved his children by carrying them on his shoulders as the water lapped around his neck.

The beds in question are sitting in the middle of the goats and four tents - fashioned out of bamboo sticks and scraps of material - on which handmade *ralli* quilts typical of Sindh province are drying in the sunshine. Amid the cries of children who appear worn down by what they have gone through, 20-year-old Sughran is trying to hydrate her baby, who was born just 15 days ago and is suffering from the heat. "I gave birth at Qazi Ahmed hospital," explains the young woman for whom the latter stages of pregnancy were dominated by the floods and life in this squalid camp.

All the children are ill, says Waqar, another woman living at the camp. Mosquitoes have proliferated in the stagnant waters and spread malaria everywhere in Sindh, hitting the most vulnerable. Waqar heads towards a tent that stands slightly apart from the rest, where she has managed to create a "draught" for her son who has [dengue](#) and is lying in bed. "The doctor told us that's how we had to bring the fever down," she explains. So as soon as she was able she bought a fan, which operates via a solar panel.

## **Endless number of camps for internally-displaced people**

Waqar admits that the family could have gone to one of the "official" camps reserved for internally-displaced persons. But they could not accept the risk of losing the land on which they have lived for 14 years. She accuses a local politician, who owns neighbouring land, of having pumped and directed floodwater towards their land. "The water should have been absorbed two months ago. We'll have to rebuild our house afterwards," says one of the men. "The foundations were damaged."

*One of the many camps for internally displaced persons at Sehwan in Sindh. © Photo Nejma Brahim / Mediapart*

It is lunchtime, and on the outskirts of Johi village in Dadu district a young man is returning to the 'Benazir Colony' camp where tents provided by the [National Disaster Management Authority](#) (NDMA) line the road. He is proud to be coming back with three fish, all dangling from a line, that he can sell for 100 rupees or around 46 cents each. "With that I can buy dinner for my family [*editor's note, of five*]," says a smiling Ghulam Din, surrounded by children whose clothes have been blackened by grime, their hair burnt by the sun.

A little further away Faky Muhammad, who is in his 60s and dressed in an emerald green traditional [shalwar kameez](#) outfit, criticises the lack of ongoing support from the authorities whom he says have "passed the buck" over their fate. "We've now lived here for two months," he says. "At the start we got help from the army and NGOs, but we've had nothing more for the last 20 days. And some people who didn't suffer from the floods have come here to take advantage of the help at the camp." The family man says he cannot return to his home which was destroyed and which is still surrounded by water.

At the official camp at Sehwan, the nearest town, hundreds of tents are lined up in rows on land that was spared by the floods. Those who have not been able to find a place there have camped nearby, along the road. One such person is Lala who is spending her third month here. This young woman is from Khirdin, a village close to Lake Manchar which overflowed as a result of the heavy rain. She, her husband and their children had no choice but to flee their home and take refuge here, as they did in 2010 during the last great floods that hit Pakistan.

Some of the men here are fishermen, others are farmers. They insist that no one intends to leave their land or their village and that if other natural disasters strike then they would come back here to find refuge while they wait to return to their house. "We want to live and die at home," whispers Lala. The children clinging onto her knees keep coughing while her other youngsters, those with more energy, have gone down to the river to wash.

The refugees say that a woman and several children have already drowned while washing themselves. This is the same water that they use to drink and to cook. The cooking is done in a pot placed directly on the ground, right next to the scruffy container used to carry the water. Having initially received some practical aid from the NDMA and NGOs, the flood victims all insist that the government has now "cut off aid" to encourage them to return home, as the authorities assume that

the floods have receded. "But our homes are still full of water!" they declare.

*A family living by the road close to Khairpur Nathan Shah while they wait for their house to re-emerge from the waters. © Photo Nejma Brahim / Mediapart*

One man, aged 50, still seems traumatised by events. When the waters flooded his village his cousin was swept away and drowned, as were two of his neighbours. Elsewhere in the same camp, the state's strategy seems to have had some effect on the refugees. "We're going to try to go back home, there's no longer anything here to help us," says one father as he loads the back of a pick-up truck. The family are hoping to be able to live close to Lake Manchar and fish for their livelihood while they wait for the water levels to subside.

Sikander Marri, a doctor working for Neotec, a company which has pioneered mobile health services in Pakistan, says a quarter of the people who have been displaced internally and who have been living in the Sehwan area have already left. "We estimate that there are around thirteen camps in the surrounding area and still close to 10,000 families living in tents, each of them with at least four children," he says. In Sindh province itself more than 14.5 million people have been affected by the floods. It is the worst-hit province, ahead of Baluchistan, with 757 deaths - close to half of all the flood-related deaths across the country - 8,422 people injured, more than 430,000 animals killed, more than a million homes destroyed and 8,389 kilometres or 5,212 miles of roads damaged.

On Friday October 21<sup>st</sup> a long queue stretches out in front of Dr Marri's lorry which is operating as a mobile hospital. The doctor now sees between 200 and 300 people a day, compared with 600 a day immediately after the floods. "We see a lot of cases of malaria, dengue and even hepatitis B and C. The internally-displaced have lost everything and often don't have food or shelter. Malnutrition and respiratory infections are also now appearing," the doctor says, as he examines a baby suffering from severe diarrhoea. The baby's mother says: "We live at the camp and he's been ill for several days. We don't know what more to do." The number of cases of pneumonia in young babies has also risen recently.

### **Homes and land ravaged by the water**

As the sun sets over the small village of Abdul Hakim, which consists of around 15 homes and cotton fields submerged under the water, the shadow of Abdul Aziz appears in the distance, amid the bricks and the tall plants that have prospered in the stagnant water. The teenager moves forward slowly, one foot after the other, aware that he is trampling over the ruins of his own house. Two thirds of the building have been destroyed, including the bedrooms, the kitchen and the bathroom; as well as the low wall that separated it from the fields and which was built after the floods in 2010.

"We thought that it would protect us from other disasters but it quickly gave way," admits Abdul's mother Dilshad, a widow who has two children in total. The family fled as soon as the general evacuation was announced; in many cases these announcements were made via the local mosques. She came back to the area ten days before Mediapart met her, though she knows that it will take years to get her house back to its former state and that the surrounding water will not be absorbed for another two months. "My sole concern is our next meal," she says. Her brother-in-law, a farmer, brings them some provisions every now and then. The family has improvised a makeshift kitchen by piling up bricks to create an oven.

*In the village of Abdul Hakim a family is trying to move back into the ruins of their house. © Photo Nejma Brahim / Mediapart*

Dilshad has also sold the small reserves of wheat that she was able to save from the floods to make a little money. Her daughter Soumaya is sitting on one of the beds outside and does not say a word. "We can't sleep in the part that is still standing because it could collapse at any moment," says Abdul Aziz. But his mother Dilshad says she could never sell this land and move elsewhere, even though she cannot farm it at the moment. "It belonged to our ancestors. Even though we know there will be other disasters in the future, certainly worse than these, we will stay," she insists.

It's a feeling shared to an extent by her neighbours who live on the other side of the road and who have also come back home to live in their flood-ravaged house. "These are the third floods that I've experienced, the first was in 1976 when I was a child, then 2010. This time it's ten times bigger," says Hedayet who is surrounded by five of her children - two more are in hospital - and her husband as they stand amid the rubble. "I would never have believed that it could be so severe. When I was at the refugee camp I came to realise that the next [*floods*] will be even bigger."

Hedayet, her prominent cheekbones accentuated by her nose piercing, says she is worried about the climate getting out of control - global warming is said to have increased extreme rainfall in Pakistan by 50%. And while she says she is not "attached" to the surrounding land, which she doesn't own but which she farms with her family, she cannot really envisage quitting rural life. "We haven't studied, no one will give us the time of day in the towns. Here we have contacts who provide us with work, we manage to get by," she says.

But how can one tackle the consequences of the climate crisis, for example the issue of the polluted well water that no one has been drinking since 2010? The following day, on the road leading to Khairpur Nathan Shah, a city with a population of 100,000, some inhabitants are making difficult progress through the water by foot, cart or scooter in order to get back to their homes. The floodwaters submerged close to 80% of the city, covering a petrol pump and even trees in the fields. "Only a small part was spared, because it's slightly higher compared with the rest of the city," says Saba, who along with 20 relatives has had to live on a strip of dry land by the side of the road.

Hedayet and her husband have already lived through three floods and are expecting more natural disasters. © Photo Nejma Brahim / Mediapart

You have to delve into the city's small streets to discover little groups of local residents who are surviving among the wreckage of the disaster. Saba comes back here regularly to check on the water level. "My house is still submerged, we'll have to wait at least two months to be able to rebuild it," she says. With her son and a neighbour she gets into a small boat so she can reach the ruins of her home. The neighbour uses a bamboo stick as an oar on this artificial lake which has destroyed all the houses in its path.

"This is my house," she declares, even though we can see nothing. She points her finger into the water where bricks now form a pile, then manages to pull one out of the water. It's an apocalyptic scene. After continuing its journey the boat stops in front of several homes whose walls have been swallowed up by the waters. They belong to Saba's mother and sister. Several children are playing amid the ruins as if nothing was amiss, while a teenager is climbing onto the roof of his house to examine the damage and report it to his father who remains below.

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“We’re not just fighting the floods but also their consequences, the poverty, the snakes and the scorpions that you find just about everywhere, the lack of food and drinking water ...” sighs Muhammad Musa, a man in his forties who cannot hold back the tears. His wife died several weeks ago from malaria. “We were living with relatives at Masri Chandio [*editor’s note, a village in Sindh province*]. She was ill for several days but I didn’t have any money to buy her medicine,” he says. She left behind three children, the oldest of whom is just twelve.

Another inhabitant says that he lost two nieces and an aunt following the floods: one needed a blood transfusion, and another a form of treatment that they could not receive during the crisis. “I’m still afraid to to enter my house, it’s like I was traumatised,” he says, admitting that he prefers to sleep outside, amid the stagnant water where the children tramp around and surrounded by the sickening stench that everyone has now grown used to. These particular inhabitants came back home two weeks ago. On occasions they find the personal effects of their neighbours lying under the stones of their house.

Since their return the inhabitants say the authorities have been conspicuous by their absence. To survive, the victims have been forced to ask for food from those local businesses and restaurants in the area who escaped the floodwaters. “[*The authorities*] did bring us machines to pump the water but without giving us the fuel to make them work. No one here has the resources to buy any,” says Hub Ali, aged 65, who left some of his family in safety in Karachi until he is able to bring them back.

“The government has left us for dead. It’s as if we didn’t exist,” he says. Several people near by then accuse a politician from Sehwan of having arranged for one of the embankments on Lake Manchar to fail in order to spare his own town, knowing that others would be flooded. Mediapart understands that the authorities made several announcements asking the inhabitants of Khairpur Nathan Shah to evacuate but that many preferred to remain, citing their experience of the 2010 floods when the situation did not become so serious.

As she returns to her camp Saba passes in front of the mosque where some people have stored the belongings they were able to save; mainly bed linen, which is still drying in the sunshine, some clothes and religious books, which have been placed high up in the building or on the roof.

Three boys are wading through the submerged fields from the side of the road, pushing with some difficulty a floating empty container, which they will doubtless fill with drinking water on the other side of the river. It is an image that on its own sums up what Pakistan is having to endure, tackling one of the worst natural disasters that it has ever known.

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**P.S.**

• Mediapart. NOVEMBER 1, 2022:  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/international/011122/how-sindh-province-still-struggling-recv>

[r-after-pakistans-devastating-floods](#)

- The original French version of this article can be found [here](#).

*English version by Michael Streeter*

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