

# Disaster

# in Pakistan

by Javed Iqbal  
and Kaukab Siddique

On the night of Thursday, November 12, a tidal wave of about 30 feet, propelled by cyclonic winds of 120 to 150 miles an hour, struck the coastal areas of East Pakistan. For a six-hour nightmare, the sea and the sky combined in deadly perfection and wrought havoc on an area of about 2800 square miles, embracing the five coastal districts of East Pakistan. The result — unprecedented destruction and human suffering.

Official death toll (so far) is about 200,000 but the true figure would never be known. Almost three million people have been rendered homeless and an estimated 600,000 tons of standing rice crop has been destroyed. Cattle and poultry have been completely wiped out and there is acute shortage of drinking water — all available sources having been contaminated by sea water.

These are statistics, "some hard facts and figures" — man's way of presenting some sort of order in chaotic situations. But they veil and completely blur the grim aspects of this tragedy, the untold human misery and numbing shock of those who actually faced the disaster.

Sitting here in our heated homes, thousands of miles away from the devastated area, we simply cannot comprehend the sheer magnitude of this calamity and plight of those who suffered.

To make matters worse, some of the foreign journalists who went there to cover the relief operations, have been callous enough to 'spice' their reports with some biased views of local political situation.

It is being proclaimed by these gentlemen of the world press, most of whom never visited that part of the world before, that the Government of Pakistan had not taken adequate preventive measures, that the relief operations were not running smoothly etc., etc.

It is very conveniently overlooked that the Govt. of Pakistan alone have been handling the situation for many years. Only this time the staggering magnitude of the disaster was beyond the means and resources of a country like Pakistan.

To understand the nature of this catastrophe, it is essential to have some knowledge of the area, its climate, its resources and above all, the people who live there. No one can claim to be better equipped to give this perspective than the people who come from that country — the Pakistanis.

Floods and cyclones are a seasonal phenomenon in East Pakistan — like the hurricanes off the eastern coast of United States and the typhoons in the Pacific countries. East Pakistan has the second highest rainfall in South Asia — an average of 82.4 inches per annum. In some parts of the province, the rainfall ranges from 90 to 140 inches a year.

However, many of the districts which are flooded in the 'wet season' — incongruously, suffer from a sharp deficiency of rain during the 'dry season' and depend for their survival on the uninterrupted flow of the principal rivers which course through the province.

The catastrophic dimensions of these twin seasonal disasters, i.e. the excess of water in fall and the acute shortage in spring, should be continually kept in perspective. These alternating periods of ravaging floods and scorching droughts take place in a region which is one of the most densely populated areas of the world (about seventy-two million people live in an area of about

54,000 square miles), shrinking space and ever-increasing food requirements.

The crux of East Pakistan's flood problem is that the rainy or 'wet monsoon' season in the province coincides with the peak discharge of the great rivers which have their origin in the Himalayas, flow into India and then cross into East Pakistan; namely, the Ganges (Padma) and the Brahmaputra.

On an average, about one billion acre-feet of water sweeps across East Pakistan from catchment basins outside the country during the monsoon season. Simultaneously, about 100 million acre-feet of run-off water is generated by rainfall within the province itself.

The imagination boggles at the amount of water involved. If this water did not continue its movement seaward, emptying into the Bay of Bengal, the whole of East Pakistan would be inundated to a depth of 34 feet of water during each monsoon season.

Whenever East Pakistan is severely hit by floods — for example, in 1955, 1962 and this year — a question immediately springs to mind: What can be done about this problem?

At the invitation of successive Pakistani Administrations, some of the world's most experienced and authoritative hydrologists have tackled the situation first hand. These include the famous Krug Mission (1955), the studies of General Hardin (1963) and the work of Professor Thijsse (1964).

These experts have come to the same conclusion; that the flood problem in East Pakistan is very complicated and its solution highly complex, involving a wide variety of techniques, many of them far beyond the financial and technical resources of Pakistan.

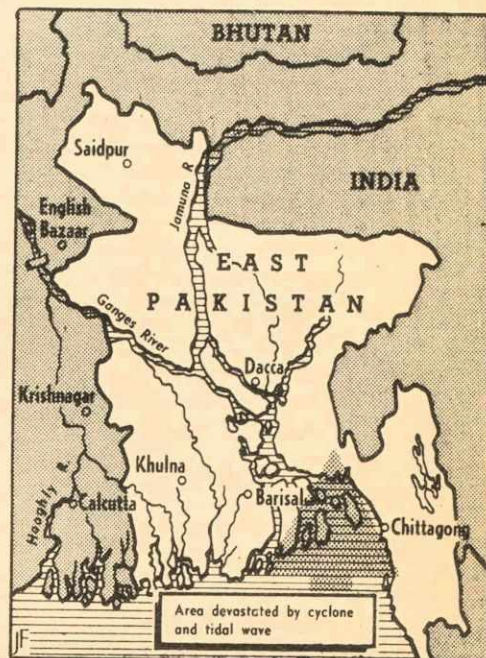
Nonetheless, on the basis of these and many other studies, the East Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority pressed ahead with implementing a series of flood control projects.

During the Second and Third Five Year Plans (1960-70) approximately \$1/4 billion rupees were allocated for the flood control program. During the past year, however, Pakistan has revised this program.

Significantly, the Government's new approach took shape before the latest ravaging floods in September, 1970. Under the new policy the flood control program was given top priority and it was decided that it should be tackled on a national level and on a massive, emergency basis.

Drawing on its successful experience in implementing the internationally-financed Indus Basin Project, Pakistan turned to the world financial community for assistance. The response has been extraordinarily encouraging.

The World Bank, for example, has displayed a deep interest in the problem and has recently endorsed a massive 1.6 billion dollar flood control program for East Pakistan.



The first phase of the World Bank Plan will take three years to implement and will provide flood protection for five million acres of arable land, which is approximately one-third of the productive agricultural land now regularly harassed by floods in the monsoon season.

The plan is expected to be finalised in this month, when the Pakistan Aid Consortium reconvenes in Paris.

Accordingly, for the first time, a flood control program is shaping up in East Pakistan on a massive and internationally-financed basis. More important, perhaps, is that the program is being treated on a "crash" basis at the national level. Thus the World Bank Plan, which hopefully will be launched next year, will unfold in conjunction with the Fourth Five-Year Plan of Pakistan.

The success or failure of these joint ventures in the course of the next five years will undoubtedly have a profound impact on the future economic development of Pakistan's eastern province, strategically located at the cross-roads of South and Southeast Asia.

Finally, coming back to the present tragedy, the people of Pakistan are grateful for the assistance which has poured in from all parts of the world. Pakistanis living in Canada have been touched by the generosity of the people and the Government of Canada.

But all of us must realize that only the first phase in this generous effort has been realized so far. The enormous task of rehabilitation and long term sustenance of the victims has yet to begin.

The three million people who have lost all their worldly possessions will need assistance for at least a year before they are able to stand on their own feet again. They are hopeful that the world will not abandon them to hunger and disease.

**Donations in the form of cheque or money order can be sent to:**

1. The Pakistan Relief Operations  
C/ O The Canadian Red Cross Society,  
**BOX: 366, Halifax, N.S.**
2. Pakistan Relief Fund  
C/ O The Islamic Association of the Maritime Provinces of Canada,  
**P.O. Box: 116, Dartmouth, N.S.**

The donations are tax deductible and will be gratefully acknowledged with a receipt.