News
EarthBeat

A displaced family sits with their belongings along a road with rising flood water, following rains and floods during the monsoon season in Bhan Syedabad, Pakistan, Sept. 8, 2022. (CNS photo/Akhtar Soomro, Reuters)

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An Irish missionary priest in Pakistan said the "sheer scale" of the flooding disaster is "hard to comprehend" and "the misery of people, camped on the side of the road with their meager belongings, is heart-breaking to see."

Columban Fr. Liam O'Callaghan told CNS there was "an urgent need for relief aid," and he appealed to Catholics worldwide to respond.

"The reality is shocking. The infrastructure — like roads, bridges, rail lines, schools, health centers — is so damaged. Where do you start? It will take years to repair," he said via Zoom from the Columban-run parish of St. Thomas the Apostle in Badin, a rural city in the Diocese of Hyderabad in Sindh province.

The Pakistani government has declared a national emergency. More than 1,100 people died and many more were injured in the flooding caused by this year's significantly heavier monsoon rains, which deluged the South Asian country over a two-month period. More than 220,000 houses were destroyed and another 500,000 were damaged.

Aid agencies are finding it difficult to get into the areas where relief is most needed due to the damage caused to hundreds of bridges and thousands of miles of road. The economic losses are estimated to be over $10 billion.

O'Callaghan, who has been working in Pakistan since 1998, said that while the whole country has been suffering, Sindh and Balochistan provinces, in the south and southwest, have been the worst-affected by the floods.

The country experienced nearly 190% more rain than the 30-year average in this year's monsoon season, with Sindh province getting 466% more rain than the average.

"There has been six months of extreme weather and climate chaos, a cocktail starting with the heat wave in March and April. March was one of the hottest on record, with 60% less rainfall. That was followed by heavier monsoon rains, and the glacier melts in the north filled the rivers," O'Callaghan explained.

"In Sindh province, where the Columbans work, the situation is still critical. The majority of the province is under water at the moment. The sheer scale is hard to comprehend. In places it is like looking out on a lake as far as the eye can see," he said in late September.

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The area along the flood plain of the Indus River was badly affected. "About 2 million acres of cultivated crops have been wiped out, and many hundreds of thousands of livestock have been lost. This will lead to food shortages and food inflation over the coming months," the priest said.

He added that he is worried about the impact of the coming winter and the challenge of waterborne diseases linked to the lack of sanitation and clean drinking water. Cholera, malaria and dengue fever are likely to thrive in stagnant flood waters.

In Badin and Khipro, where the Columbans work, many parishioners have been affected. The missionaries have been helping to distribute food rations, tents, mosquito nets, and medical aid to the most vulnerable families.

Christians are a small minority in Sindh and Balochistan provinces. Father O'Callaghan said they tend to be poor tenant farmers.

"Their lives were already fragile, and the flooding has made it even worse," he said.

The relief effort could last for months, while house reconstruction will come later.

"There are big questions such as where do you rebuild?" said O'Callaghan. "Those worst affected were already the poorest who were living in areas prone to flooding."

The priest, a member of Hyderabad Diocesan Climate Change Group, warns that there is "an urgent need for wealthy countries to reduce greenhouse emissions."

"Pakistan has contributed very little to emissions, but it is in countries like Pakistan that the effects of the climate crisis are worst. The church needs to take more seriously the ecological teaching of Pope Francis and use its moral authority in the corridors of power."

Read this next: Religious in Pakistan offer relief for victims still reeling from historic floods