

Beyond the deluge

Naveen Naqvi yesterday

When I was in Bonn, Germany in June for the Deutsche-Welle-arranged Global Media Forum (GMF) conference on climate change, one of the keynote speakers was a 12-year-old boy. Felix Finkbeiner of Plant for the Planet, a climate protection network for school-age children, acted on an idea he had three years ago to plant one million trees in Germany, succeeded, and has expanded his campaign to 70 countries. In his speech at the GMF, Finkbeiner claimed that in another 50 years, when he visits the museum with his children, he would be embarrassed to point out that the time of their grandparents (our present) would be called the 'carbon age.'

With natural disasters unfolding in Pakistan, China and Russia, it appears that the young boy has more insight than heads of state. Although we cannot say immediately that the inexplicable weather patterns we have seen the past few days are due to climate change, it does seem to be more than a coincidence. Having read Kamila Shamsie's brilliant piece in *The Guardian* in response to the floods crisis, blaming deforestation and a powerful timber mafia for the damage after the rains, I asked Professor Adil Najam if he could connect Pakistan's floods to climate change. The Boston University-based environmental expert, who has contributed to Al Gore's Nobel-winning paper on climate change, said: "It would be premature to say whether these floods have anything to do directly with climate change or not, but they are a good reminder for all of us of why we should be thinking of climate change... and fast. The rains are clearly a natural phenomenon. But there is nothing natural about the death and destruction these rains have brought. That is all human-manufactured. Our arrogant policies that have disregarded the ecological integrity of the natural systems we depend upon have magnified the fury of the torrents that have been sweeping across Pakistan. Deforestation in the north has robbed nature of its natural barriers and bad urban planning made streets in Nowshehra and elsewhere turn into torrential rivers. I hope we will learn from what we have been seeing and plan for a more sustainable development in the rebuilding process, and also realise that whether we 'cause' climate change or not, it is we — and especially the poorest amongst us — who will suffer its gravest consequences."

We cannot prevent the wrongs of the state that have already occurred, and have led to vast devastation in the rural areas of the country. As is quite common in third world nations, where the state leaves a void, it is non-government organisations and individuals who must fill it. While international contributions may not meet the standards that were set by disasters such as the Haitian earthquake and the Tsunami of 2004, and this is not surprising given how unpopular Pakistan is in the global media, people on the ground have rolled up their sleeves, and gotten to work.

Dr Nezihe Hussain, a voluntary worker with the Pakistan Medical Association, warned that flood relief efforts even by ordinary Pakistanis need to be sustainable. She said, "What is crucial is that people realise that donations should not stop after Ramazan or Eid. This is not just your annual zakat. The floods have caused inconceivable horrors, and those will not just continue but grow unless we keep on giving and helping."

Published in The Express Tribune, August 15th, 2010.

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