President orders probe into reports of discrimination against minorities in relief operations

SUKKUR, Sep 1 (APP) President Asif Ali Zardari has taken exception to the media reports that some members of the minority communities were denied flood relief assistance and driven out of the relief camps in Sindh province and called for an inquiry and action against officials if found involved. Spokesperson to the President, Farhatullah Babar said that the President taking note of media reports of a protest rally in Hyderabad on Monday against the maltreatment of Dalits in flood relief called for a probe into the matter and steps to ensure that no discrimination was shown in the relief and rehabilitation operations.

The President said that floods were a natural disaster and should serve to unite the people, not divide them. It will be most unfortunate and reflect poorly on the country’s image and adversely impact on national unity if relief work was influenced by considerations of caste, creed or ethnicity.

"All citizens of the country have equal rights and more so people who have been hit by the worst natural disaster in the history of the country. Discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds cannot be tolerated”, he added.

President Zardari called for an inquiry into the reports of discrimination and appropriate measures to ensure that the relief work was not influenced by such considerations. The President also called for action against officials if found involved in discrimination in the relief and rehabilitation works, the spokesperson said.
Discrimination in aid

It is no secret that ethnic, sectarian and religious minorities in Pakistan face discrimination, but recent reports that this deplorable mindset is affecting flood relief efforts are deeply disturbing. On Monday, a large number of people in Hyderabad were driven to taking out a protest rally against the maltreatment of minority community flood victims. They cited two occasions when they were attacked and driven out of a relief camp.

A day before that, flood-affected families at an emergency relief camp in Thatta district complained that they were being refused aid, even by government officials, because they were Dalits. There have been numerous other reports: people being refused shelter because of their ethnicity, caste or religion, being discriminated against in the distribution of aid goods and being driven away from or forced to live on the very margins of the few camps that exist.

Discrimination on ethnic and religious grounds is deeply entrenched in Pakistan and will not change overnight. Yet that it is being used as an excuse to strip people of their rights as equal citizens even during a time of calamity is abhorrent. Whether Muslim, Hindu or Christian, high caste or low caste, the flood victims are all equally deserving of the attention of official and non-official aid channels. Resources are scarce and the desperate number in millions. Providing help across the board to the best of its abilities, irrespective of any ideology, is the first task of the state and society. Apart from the victims’ equal right to survival essentials such as shelter, potable water and food, the fact that the country was even before the floods rent along ethnic, sectarian and religious grounds must be kept in mind. Discrimination at this time will only deepen the divide and cause resentment that could unravel any possibility of future cohesiveness.


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KARACHI

Caste becomes barrier between flood victims and relief

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By Jan Kasikshi

KARACHI

Caste still seems to playing a pivotal role in our society even at this time of devastation and misery, as a number of flood-stricken families are being denied aid by government officials at the Mir Imdad camp, outside the historical Jhirk Town, Thatta district, simply because they belong to a low-caste ethnic group. They are Dalits.

"The government is not ready to consider us as flood victims," said Gulab, son of Krishan, a Dalit by caste. "Despite the fact that all of our belongings were washed away by the flood, we are not receiving food or any other stuff."

Apart from Gulab, there are at least seven other Dalit families living outside camps that were set up in the same vicinity after the floodwaters inundated the Tando Hafiz Shah town and 11 other villages.

Local philanthropists come to distribute food and other items among people at the camps except the Dalits. Especially, at the time of Iftar, crowds of local people could be seen giving food, fruit and sweets to the children but Gulab's kids can only observe the other children eating andlore them out.

"It seems there is no place for us — neither at the camp nor in people's hearts," Gulab said. "We survived the flood but this discrimination is proving hard for us to endure," he said, adding that his children are still waiting for help. "Any kind of help," he emphasized.

When the water hit Tando Hafiz Shah and other villages, the low-caste families, who would cultivate vegetables in the riverbed as sharecroppers before the flood, also shifted to the Jhirk town, the only place they found safe at the time in the surrounding area.

Govindo, who is also living at a makeshift camp, took a sip of tea at a local tea stall while watching TV and told The News that the children of the urban elite visit the camps and distribute toys and sweets among the flood-hit children to express solidarity with them. "But this solidarity is expressed with those who are not Dalits," he said. "In this situation, we don't have any other option but to wait for the day we could be able to retrieve our farms, which we lost in the floods."

Gopaldas Bagri, a Dalit who belongs to the Dari Union Council of the Kandhore district, told The News that at least 50 Dalit families were displaced from the vicinity when the Guddu barrage received high flow of water and the Katcha area was inundated. He said that he had approached different organizations engaged in rescue and relief work to pay attention to the low-caste community who have also lost their belongings to the flood.

"I cannot understand that why, even at this moment, we are being refused and deprived of food. Our children are crying in hunger at makeshift homes and we are unable to give them a piece of meal," he said.

Mussarat Mandhrio, an activist from Thatta, said that the Dalits are not the victims of the flood only but they are also victims of the historical Jhirk town. "These people have been isolated," he said.

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