

Update on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

When will Hunza Lake IDPs Return Home?

Gilgit-Baltistan is going through its biggest humanitarian crisis. Around 3,000 people, who have either lost their houses to the January 4 landslide or the 23-kilometer-long and 380 feet deep lake that Hunza River has turned into after being blocked by landslide debris, are living as IDPs at relief camps in Karimabad, Altit, Shishkat and Gulmit. Another 'group' of 20,000 people have been evacuated to dozens of camps established at safer locations in Hunza-Nagar, Gilgit and Diamer districts, on both sides of the Hunza River and Indus River, due to threat of flash floods. The evacuees have been registered as internally displaced people (IDPs), which many consider a misnomer. "These people have been evacuated to safer places as a precautionary measure but they have neither lost their houses, nor their property", a development professional argues. This writer during a recent visit to the relief camps in Hunza-Nagar and Gilgit districts had the opportunity to see at first hand the condition in which the inmates of the camps were living.

The government of Gilgit-Baltistan, Focus Humanitarian Assistance (FOCUS) Pakistan and Pakistan Red Crescent Society (PRCS) are managing the relief camps. Out of the total, five camps are being managed by Focus, two by PRCS and the rest are directly being managed by the District Disaster Management Authority. Various organizations, including AKDN and UN agencies, as well as political and religious organizations, are providing food and non-food relief items to the evacuated and displaced people. Hygienic toilets, washrooms and water filtration plants have been constructed at most of the relief camps while Pakistan Baitul Mal is also providing cooked food to the IDPs. The local press of Gilgit-Baltistan had many stories related to poor quality of the cooked food being distributed in the relief camps.

Several organizations are conducting sessions on hazard management and hygiene in the camps. The DDMA has also placed banners in the camps containing instructions for the campers. Health facilities have also been provided at most of the camps but the complaints of lack of medicines and practitioners, especially at Jaglot (Guru) camp, are also numerous. While the government is providing electricity to the relief camps, beating the heat is an issue being faced by the evacuated people. "They have shifted us to these single file tents and the heat is unbearable", a man complained at a camp in Jutal, Gilgit. Managers of almost all the camps said that the IDPs are demanding pedestal fans to fight the soaring temperature. Camp managers are reluctant to provide electric fans because of higher costs as well as potential hazards.

The single file tents provided by the government to IDPs at most of the camps are not rainwater resistant. At many places, the camps have been established at sites that are prone to other natural hazards, like boulder falls, landslides, debris flow and flash floods. One of the largest camps, established initially at Al-Azhar School near Gilgit city had to be shifted to the Karakoram International University after experts warned that the camp site was hazard prone. Some relief camps have been, reportedly, established at disputed lands with the backing of revenue department staff. The intention, in such cases, is occupation of the disputed land after the crisis is over. Land disputes are one of the major causes of unrest in various parts of Gilgit-Baltistan already and one would not like to create a new source of such disputes. The biggest issue confronting the evacuated people is related to the uncertainty about returning home. While the disaster lake has gradually started discharging the accumulated water, experts think that it may not be safe to allow the evacuated people to return to their houses. While the experts warn of a flood, they are reluctant to give dates. The sufferings of the IDPs, and the resultant restlessness, are likely to increase manifolds if their stay at the relief camps prolongs.

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