

Pasni catastrophe

The Shadi Kor dam burst in Pasni, one of the towns that dot Pakistan's long coastline, is unfortunate enough. More unfortunate is the fact that it could have been avoided, had the authorities concerned been responsible about reinforcing and maintaining the structure. The loss of human lives and property could also have been precluded had the staff on duty managed the water inflow to the dam in order to avoid its accumulation beyond capacity, especially given the unprecedented downpour over the previous weeks. But apparently the tradition of learning from experience is non-existent among official quarters. It was perhaps this laid back approach that led to the death of 61 people and more than 25,000 being rendered homeless. The death toll is likely to rise, as 500 people are officially declared "missing".

The disaster in Pasni must also be analyzed in the larger context, and not treated as an isolated incident that is an outcome of the inefficiency of a few officials — a few heads rolling here and there will also not resolve the issue. Nor should it be shrugged off as a natural disaster beyond human control. The root cause of such tragedies in the past as well has been essentially the lack of a culture of disaster management. Despite having faced catastrophic floods, famines and sea storms, Pakistan continues to drag its feet on developing a holistic framework for disaster preparedness, response and mitigation.

It is therefore unsurprising that Pakistan is among countries where the number of casualties in such disasters (which erroneously dubbed as 'natural' but are in fact man-made), is increasing as compared to others where it is decreasing. The existing official mindset is fixated by the idea of relief distri-

bution after the disaster has already wreaked havoc and human misery. Even the relief distribution at times is not merit-based, and is used by state functionaries and local influentials to appease their supporters.

Despite possessing one of the world's best flood-warning and meteorological forecasting systems, the government has yet to evolve a mechanism to share the vital information so collected with people at risk on time. The gravity of the incident in terms of the number of deaths could have been drastically reduced had the authorities used the information and evacuated the areas before tragedy struck. Moreover, departments responsible for the maintenance of water storage infrastructure must also explain why the required refurbishment of the dam was not carried out.

What remains most important is a policy framework envisaging a specialized institution geared only towards ensuring disaster preparedness - among the population and departments, which should be ready to respond and deliver relief to who deserve it the most. Failing this, disasters will continue to take their toll on the most vulnerable segments of society.