**Glaciers at risk**

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During my visit to Skardu last September, my hosts asked me to come again during the winter snowfall, saying that the snow in Gilgit-Baltistan is amazingly beautiful.

The construction of an international airport in Skardu has also transformed the Himalayan valley into the centre of tourist interest.

However, for the past few months, whenever I have contacted the people of Skardu over the phone, I have been told of an unusual change in weather patterns. The area is still warm and clear due to no snowfall and the temperature is also higher than normal.

I also want to visit Deosai, the second-highest plateau in the world and located about 27km from Skardu. Every year, more than 10 feet of snow falls there between October and January. This snow melts by the end of spring and joins the Satpara Lake, where a dam is functional for ensuring irrigation, electricity and clean drinking water to meet the needs of the residents of Skardu. I am shocked to learn that these days there is less than three inches of snow at Deosai.

The Himalayan glaciers in our region are known for snowfall and snow tourism across the globe. Three of the world’s seven largest glaciers are located in Gilgit-Baltistan. It usually receives heavy snowfall during winter, which lasts from December 21 to January 29.

During the 40-day-long snowfall season, everything there is covered with snow. Tourists from all over the world visit Gilgit-Baltistan to enjoy the breathtaking views of the snowfall. However, for the first time in the history of the Himalayan region, three months of winter have passed without rain and snow.

According to experts, the melting of the Himalayan glaciers is increasing rapidly due to high temperatures and air pollution. Some warn that climate change will also cause countless natural streams and waterfalls that have been flowing for centuries to vanish, and people living in the high mountains of the Himalayas and Karakoram will be forced to migrate in search of water.

Similarly, severe challenges including the water and food crisis may emerge in the coming months, which will not be limited to people residing in the mountains but also spread to other areas. The melting of glaciers can also create natural bursts to send floods down the valleys.

A report by the British Broadcasting House (published five years ago) says that climate change poses serious threats to glaciers in the Himalayas and that 36 per cent of the glaciers will disappear by the year 2100 if priority measures are not taken.

These ice glaciers are the most important source of water supply for more than 250 million people living in eight countries including Pakistan, India, China, Nepal, and Bhutan. The Himalayan glaciers also provide a natural water supply to the world’s most significant rivers, such as the Ganges, Indus, Yellow, and Mekong.

The situation of the driest winter in the Himalayan region is not limited to Pakistan-administered areas, but all the Himalayan countries, including India, Nepal and Bhutan, are facing more or less the same challenges. Scientists are concerned that due to the rise in global temperatures, half of these glaciers will disappear by the end of the century. The damage to the glaciers in the Himalayan region will result in famine, food insecurity, and water crisis throughout the region.

I think that the absence of snow in the current winter season predicts future undesirable conditions. We must understand that it is not just a matter of the country, but there is an urgent need for all countries living in the Himalayas to come forward and jointly formulate a strategy at the state level.

Concrete measures should be taken in the context of the current weather conditions. Although there is still no sign of snowfall in Gilgit-Baltistan, locals are hopeful that the area will receive rain by the end of January and that the Himalayan valley will once again emerge as the favourite destination for snow tourism.

The writer is a former member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council.

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