

As wheat rots in Pakistan's go-downs, 193 children have died of starvation in Thar district

Hunger Alert, AHRC

(Edited text of a Hunger Alert issued by the Asian Human Rights Commission: [AHRC-HAG-001-2014](#), 10 March 2014)

Dear friends,

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has received disturbing information regarding 193 children starving to death in Thar district of Pakistan. While the authorities have conceded half of the number, they are attempting to attribute them to different diseases. Independent sources have conclusive evidence however, that the deaths are all caused by extreme poverty and chronic shortage of drinking water due to a year-old drought, which is also causing a famine. The severe lack of health facilities in the area—which has just one 74-bed hospital serving a population of 1.5 million—further complicates the situation and has given rise to serious distress migration to nearby districts. To make matters worse, the provincial government has confessed to the government's negligence in distributing wheat packets released to address the situation; the wheat has been rotting while children were dying. Most of the victims belong to the Dalit community and it is believed that government apathy and inaction emanates from the institutionalized persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan.

Case narrative

A total of 193 deaths of children have been reported from the Thar district of Sindh province over the last three months. Though the governmental authorities are trying to attribute these deaths to different ailments, there is strong evidence that hunger, chronic shortage of water, extreme poverty and lack of health facilities are the real reason behind them. The situation is so grim that the Chief Minister of Sindh had to concede that 60 children have in fact died in the area during the past two months, but blamed the deaths on cold weather and mother-child health conditions. He also ordered the release of 60,000 bags of wheat (each of 100 kilograms) from the official store for immediate distribution, but asserted that the children did not perish from the famine conditions prevailing in the area. Only 2,000 of these bags have been distributed however. He has also declared a 200,000 Pakistani rupees (USD 1960) compensation for the bereaved families.

The dismal health services situation in the area is such that there is only one specialty 74-bed hospital catering to a population of more than 1.5 million. The famine and consequent hunger have caused serious health issues in children, including iron deficiency. The lack of medical facilities coupled with ongoing drought conditions has resulted in the ill health of mothers, leaving them vulnerable to bear undernourished children. The government cannot absolve itself of its criminal dereliction of duty, as it has not invested in building health facilities in the area. The lack of serious government action can be understood from the fact that half of the doctor posts have been vacant for years, and barring the hospital in Mithi, no hospital has a lady doctor. Most of the victims belong to the minority Hindu Dalit community; the institutionalized persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan is believed to be the cause of government apathy and inaction.

The government cannot claim to be unaware of the grim situation, which has been building up over several years of drought, with last year itself receiving less than 100 millimeters of rainfall (as against a minimum of 300mm to avert drought conditions). Further, disregarding the clear policy of declaring an emergency if the rainfall is acutely short of that expected by the end of August, the authorities made no such declaration.

Local and national media have also been raising the issue relentlessly, as the area has no irrigation system and is completely dependent upon rain water for everything from drinking water to irrigation. Despite all this, the government failed to recognize the severity of the issue and put preventive measures in place taking advantage of the country's bumper wheat production in 2013. Only after foreign media started pointing out the rising death tolls did the Pakistani government wake up and take cosmetic measures like punishing the superintendent of Mithi hospital, instead of addressing the real issues causing the crisis.

The inefficient handling of the situation has now led to the Army being pressed into service, but this measure is too little, too late. Furthermore, most of the relief work is centered in the district headquarters of Mithi, while there is no decline in the number of deaths in the countryside. Not only are there no significant attempts to distribute relief material to those in remote areas of the district, but the authorities are not even collecting any statistical data from there, thus denying victims from any claims to the relief resources.

SUGGESTED ACTION:

Please write to the authorities mentioned below demanding immediate intervention and concrete measures to arrest the deaths of children due to hunger. You may also request them to take punitive actions against the officials neglecting their duty, and thus being responsible for such a significant loss of life.

The AHRC is writing separate letters to the Chairperson of the Committee on Rights of the Child and the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, calling for their intervention in the case.

To support this case, please visit this link: <http://www.urgentappeals.net/support.php?ua=AHRC-HAG-001-2014>

SAMPLE LETTER:

Dear,

PAKISTAN: 193 children died of hunger in Thar, while wheat rots in go-downs

Name of the victims: Children of Thar district in Sindh, Pakistan

Name of alleged perpetrators: Health and Supply officers of the region

Place of incident: Thar, Sindh, Pakistan

Time of incident: January onwards

It has come to my attention that a total of 193 deaths of children have been reported from the Thar district of Sindh province over the last three months. Though government authorities are trying to attribute these deaths to different ailments, there is strong evidence that hunger, chronic shortage of water, extreme poverty and lack of health facilities are the real reason behind them. You will be aware that the Chief Minister of Sindh has conceded that 60 children have in fact died in the area during the past two months, but blamed the deaths on cold weather and mother-child health conditions. He also ordered the release of 60,000 bags of wheat (each of 100 kilo grams) from the official store for immediate distribution, while asserting that the children did not perish from famine conditions prevailing in the area. Only 2000 of these bags have been distributed however. He has also declared a 200,000 Pakistani rupees (USD 1960) compensation for the bereaved families.

I am appalled to learn of the dismal health services situation in the area, with only one specialty 74-bed hospital catering to a population of more than 1.5 million. The famine and consequent hunger have caused serious health issues in children, including iron deficiency. The lack of medical facilities coupled with ongoing drought conditions has resulted in the ill health of mothers, leaving them vulnerable to bear undernourished children. It is a grave criminal dereliction of duty that the government has not invested in building health facilities in the area. Half of the doctor posts have been vacant for years, and barring the hospital in Mithi, no hospital has a lady doctor.

I am aware that most of the victims belong to the minority Hindu Dalit community, and that the institutionalized persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan is believed to be the cause of government apathy and inaction. This is another terrible violation of government duty and citizen rights.

With several years of drought, and last year itself receiving less than 100 millimeters of rainfall (as against a minimum of 300mm to avert drought conditions), the government cannot make any claims of being unaware of the situation. Moreover, local and national media have also been raising the issue relentlessly, as the area has no irrigation system and is completely dependent upon rain water for everything from drinking water to irrigation. It is outrageous that despite all this, the government failed to recognize the severity of the issue and put preventive measures in place, taking advantage of the country's bumper wheat production of 2013. Only after foreign media started pointing out the rising death tolls did the Pakistani government wake up and take cosmetic measures like punishing the superintendent of Mithi hospital, instead of addressing the real issues causing the crisis.

The inefficient handling of the situation has now led to the Army being pressed into service, but this measure is too little, too late. Furthermore, most of the relief work is centered in the district headquarters of Mithi, while there is no decline in the number of deaths in the countryside. Not only are there no significant attempts to distribute relief material to those in remote areas of the district, but the authorities are not even collecting any statistical data from there, thus denying victims from any claims to the relief resources.

I thus look forward to your immediate intervention to ensure that:

1. Concrete steps are taken to stop the deaths;
2. Health facilities in the area are beefed up and brought to par with the demands of the situation;
3. The officials responsible for holding up the wheat in stores instead of distributing it are prosecuted;
4. Steps are taken to build an irrigation system capable of fighting the recurrent droughts in the area; and
5. A system for monitoring and addressing such crises is put in place so that such incidents do not recur.

Sincerely,

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PLEASE SEND YOUR LETTERS TO:

1. Mr. Mian Nawaz Sharif

Prime Minister

Prime Minister House

Islamabad

PAKISTAN

Fax: +92 51 922 1596

Tel: +92 51 920 6111

E-mail: secretary@cabinet.gov.pk or pspm@pmsectt.gov.pk

2. Federal Minister of Law and Human Rights

Ministry of Law, Justice and Human Rights

Old US Aid building

Ata Turk Avenue

G-5, Islamabad

PAKISTAN

Fax: +92 51 9204108

Email: contact@molaw.gov.pk

3. Dr. Faqir Hussain

Registrar

Supreme Court of Pakistan

Constitution Avenue, Islamabad

PAKISTAN

Fax: +92 51 9213452

Email: mail@supremecourt.gov.pk

4. Syed Qaim Ali Shah

Chief Minister Sindh,

Karachi, Sindh Province

PAKISTAN

Fax: +92 21 920 2000

Email: pressecy@cmsindh.gov.pk

5. Mr. Sikandar Hayat Khan Bosan

Federal Minister For National Food Security & Research

Phone : 92-51-9210088

Fax : 92-51-9205912

Address: Ministry of National Food Security & Research,

3rd Floor, B-Block, Pak Secretariat,

Islamabad . PAKISTAN

Email : minister@mnfsr.gov.pk

6. Chief Justice of Sindh High Court

High Court Building

Saddar, Karachi

Sindh Province

PAKISTAN

Fax: +92 21 9213220

Thank you

Hunger Alerts Programme

Right to Food Programme (foodjustice@ahrc.asia)

Asian Human Rights Commission (ua@ahrc.asia)