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Pakistan Combats Growing Environmental Menace

By Benjamin Sand
Islamabad

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Pakistan's environment is in trouble. Overworked land and decade-old drought mean forests are disappearing, wells are drying up and deserts are spreading. Local environmentalists say solutions exist to combat desertification, but the problem is implementing them.

Forty-three year old farmer Faisal Mohammed leads his animals out to pasture just 45 minutes drive outside of Islamabad, in Punjab province. The chickens are followed by a few goats, then half a dozen geese, and finally a small herd of cows.

He says each cow will eat at least 20 kilograms of fresh grass. Each day his herd consumes hundreds of kilos of food and water.

It is a scene repeated throughout Pakistan every day of the week. There are hundreds of thousands of farmers and an estimated 90 million heads of livestock looking to graze.

The problem is 80 to 90 percent of Pakistan's land area is considered arid or semi-arid. Finding enough food and water for all those animals is a constant struggle.

Local environmentalists say overuse and a decade-long drought in the south, mainly in the farming provinces of Sindh and Baluchistan, are causing desertification. Rivers and forests are disappearing while vast dry lands are growing.

"When there is drought, as well as over-exploitation, it leads to poverty. And poverty again leads to over-exploitation which worsens the problem of desertification," said Maqsood Ahmed, a senior scientific officer for the Pakistan government's Agricultural Research Council. "It is a vicious cycle."



Pakistani trader waits for customers at a make-shift market for animals ahead of upcoming Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha (File photo)

He says overgrazing has compromised soil quality to the point where crop production is down by 85 percent in some southern agricultural areas.

Compounding the problem, government officials say, are dwindling water resources. In the past year alone, drought has reduced the water supply by nearly 20 percent.

Pressure on the environment translates into pressure on the population. Pakistan is seeing more and more violent conflicts erupt over dwindling natural resources.

Government troops were forced to intervene in June after rival villages clashed over water supplies in the country's rugged tribal area



Villagers of Thar desert draw water from well (File photo)

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near the Afghan border. Officials say that at least 14 people were killed before order was finally restored.

Local environmentalists say they have a plan to reverse Pakistan's desertification - which includes simple solutions like basic reforestation and getting farmers to plant new, more eco-friendly crops that need less water to grow.

Tanveer Arif, the president of Pakistan's Society for Conservation and Protection of the Environment, says one of the main challenges is not developing policies but convincing local farmers to alter their behavior.

He says that would include using more water- efficient irrigation systems, switching to cattle breeds that produce more milk on less feed and introducing crop varieties that can grow in dry land.

But even if farmers were keen to change their ways, Arif says, they don't have the

money to do so.

"Actually it's a problem of financial resources because dry-land agriculture is a very risky business, and no financing institution, like an agricultural development bank, is ready to work with risky farmers, and there is no crop insurance system in Pakistan," he noted.



Arif says that brings us to the next problem, which is political action. He notes that, while the Environment Ministry has developed dozens of new strategies for combating desertification, they are not being implemented because of competing policy priorities like security, education and job creation.

Pakistani camel seller Allahbaksh waits for customers at a make-shift animal market (File photo)

"Somehow these policies are not being integrated in the national development agenda. Maybe because we don't have a very strong lobby in Islamabad on environmental and development issues," added Arif.

The government insists it has taken note. The Ministry of the Environment recently announced a new \$17-million partnership with the United Nations to help protect the environment. The project will develop dozens of new education centers to help convince local farmers to adopt new technologies.

Environmentalists say such steps need to be taken quickly to prevent a disaster.

Pakistan, which had a population of around 35 million in 1950, now has more than 160 million people packed inside its borders and the pressure on its fragile environment is mounting.

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