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## Monsoon surprise

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

It's called monsoon season for a perfectly good reason. It happens every year at approximately the same time, hence 'season'. So why is it that every summer the city government of Karachi proves itself to be devastatingly incompetent at handling the inflow of rain? Every year, without fail, city officials feign shock and horror over the flooding of streets, the destruction of houses, electricity cuts, and the symphony of gastrointestinal disease cases crowding the hospitals. It's called monsoon season, not 'monsoon surprise'.

Our ancestors, the founders of the Indus Civilization who managed to invent and build a functioning sewage and drain system light years before their time, must be rolling in their graves. You could count the number of drains built in Karachi on one hand. The number of malls and designer parking lots, however, would require both hands and feet and then some. You can't stop the city government of Karachi from building hotels or sky scrapers, just try. Karachi is home to 'Asia's largest bank building', 'Asia's largest wedding souk/hotel', and 'Asia's largest fountain' (modeled after Lake Geneva's, naturally). But drains? Weather resistant roofs? Stable housing for the poor? No. We don't have time for such frivolous construction.

Last year the foreign designed underpass was filled to the brim with water and firefighters spent the better part of two months slowly and laboriously chucking the underpass's water into neighboring lanes, which in time had to be sucked up and dumped god knows where. This year, thanks to a pre-monsoon cyclone, the damage has been more severe.

I received emails from friends living abroad "The news is so depressing, are you ok?" I was ashamed to even answer back. Of course I was ok, I'm always ok. Those of us who live in good areas near fast food outlets and embassies are always fine; we're only slightly disturbed by monsoon season, if at all. As with any disaster or calamity, it is always the poor who are the hardest hit. The Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) estimates that 266 fishermen disappeared around the southern coastal belt and that upwards of 500 boats were destroyed, ruining the livelihood of countless fishermen. Twenty thousand houses around the coastal belt have been damaged by the incoming rains along with an approximate 100 beetle leave farms and another hundred poultry farms. The fishing town of Gadap, for one, has been decimated by the rain, with more than 800 collapsed houses and many of their residents having lost their lives. In Balochistan alone 250,000 people have been rendered homeless in this past week. The death toll has been placed upwards of 250 with scores more injured and destitute. Relegated to the fringes of our city, the residents of katchi abadis have been dutifully ignored since the rains started last week. Living in substandard housing -- sometimes just sheets of fabric supported by two sturdy

sticks and often situated near open sewers -- the residents of Katchi Abadis have had to clean their own streets and shelter themselves from the monsoon onslaught. There will be no help for them.

In fact the very notion of pre-disaster safety and post-disaster relief seems utterly alien to the city government. These concepts are not just alien, they are systematically ignored. Most, if not all, of the disaster relief being carried out for the thousands of rain affected survivors comes from organizations such as the Edhi Foundation. And it always has. Remember that.

But wait, the litany of rain related destruction continues -- keep an eye out for the city government's negligence, it's everywhere. Forty thousand phone lines went dead. Around one hundred billboards and their hoardings collapsed around the city. Was the problem that the billboards were shoddily built, you ask? Not at all. The chief minister of Sindh has a very good explanation for why those billboards fell to the ground, swatting pedestrians and causing grave damage, and it has nothing to do with their construction. According to Dr Arbab the billboards collapsed because they bore the images of "half-naked women" on them and were ruefully not designed in accordance with shariah law. Under this woefully misguided logic "half-naked women" will soon start to spontaneously combust and the pages of magazines will magically disintegrate. Unfortunately, it's got nothing to do with "half-naked women" and/or Pepsi ads. The problem is, according to the NGO Shehri, that 13,000 out of the city's 17,000 billboards are illegally and faultily constructed.

The city government and Dr Arbab are responsible for the existence and regulation of those billboards, so I'd say blame falls squarely on their shoulders.

Then the government placed ads in newspapers warning us to drink ORS to combat vomiting and diarrhea. In Pakistan, as in many countries of the developing world, diarrhea is a major killer of infants. Why? Because the poor cannot afford medicines like ORS. Pedialyte, the children's equivalent of ORS, costs Rs45 and has to be administered immediately or refrigerated, something the mass of people in Pakistan cannot afford or keep. KESC, possibly -- no, certainly -- the most criminal corporation I have ever had the displeasure of encountering, has made sure that electricity is a luxury, not a basic right. Prior to monsoon season the bulk of Karachi's residents are kept quite literally in the dark. While parks such as the sprawling Bin Qasim Park are wastefully lit twenty four hours a day, the poor of Karachi go 20 hours a day without electricity (and running water) and when monsoon season hits those four precious hours are swiftly cut by the evil masterminds running KESC.

KESC outlets and vans in Federal B area, Saddar, Lal Khoti, Jamshed Town and many more places have been attacked and set on fire in the past week. Their supreme ineptitude is grounds not only for arson, but also for legal proceedings at the highest level.

What a marvelous people this country is blessed with -- they live without basic necessities such as drinking water and electricity for days at end, having to care for children they cannot pay to feed or clothe, and yet day after day they toil to keep this ungrateful city functioning smoothly in low paying, low respect menial jobs.

They drive our cars and sweep our streets, mind our stores and run our offices. And then the advent of something as manageable as a yearly rainy season destroys what four walls they call home and lays their young down with unaffordable, but completely treatable, diseases. And yet they persevere, they have no choice but to labour on. What a pitiful government they have to look after them.