

## *An American Journalist reflects on covering the flood in Pakistan*

Article written exclusively for Hamazor

The wind-whipped open expanses of Gharo, halfway between Karachi and Thatta, are cramped with refugee camps billowing in the wind like sails on a stagnant ship. A motley crew of curious children follows me through the Aitemaad camp practicing their rudimentary English — Hello, Hello! — and smiling widely. Some of the younger children look fragile and bird-like, yet many of them manage to return my smile and share their stories. “I was scared when the water came to swallow us,” whispered one little girl whose hair is discolored from malnutrition. Most of them seem relieved to have a tent to call home and rice to fill their bellies. “I am happy here, not afraid!” exclaimed a barefoot little girl who is expertly balancing a baby on her hip.

by deena guzder



In August 2010, epic floods inundated vast expanses of Pakistan in the worst natural disaster in the country’s recent history. The floods displaced an estimated 20 million individuals, damaged 5 million homes, submerged 5,000 miles of roads, and washed away 7,000 schools and 400 health facilities that will take years to rebuild. As the media coverage of more recent world events overshadows that of Pakistan’s unprecedented flooding, the crisis continues unfolding.

I arrived in Pakistan in mid-September on a grant from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting to cover the floods. As an American journalist who had never visited Pakistan, I did not know what to expect. For many Parsis, Pakistan is seen as a dangerously volatile country full of armed religious zealots. Most Americans’ exposure to the country is limited to photos of Taliban fighters and suicide bombers. The reality I found in Pakistan bore no resemblance to this widely disseminated misperception. When traveling across the country, from the southern tip of Karachi to the northern tip of Kohistan, I met countless people who greeted me with genuine warmth and kindness. Pakistanis treated

me with more respect and appreciation than many of my compatriots back home, and they often invited me to join them for a cup of *chai* after our interview although they had recently lost their entire lives during the flood and were not in the position to entertain guests.

My trip across Pakistan started in Karachi where I spoke with doctors at the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation (SIUT) to gain a better understanding of the challenges ahead. Although international organizations such as UNICEF and Red Cross are often seen as a third-world country’s first-line of relief after a disaster, regional medical outfits such as SIUT are often better positioned to respond to local disasters since its medical staff is already versed in the problems afflicting its own population. Doctors at SIUT told me the most common post-diluvia ailments include scabies (a highly contagious parasitic skin disease that flourishes in cramped, moist quarters), gastroenteritis (a painful



inflammation of the stomach and intestines that causes vomiting and dysentery), and conjunctivitis (more commonly known as pink-eye). Just southeast of Karachi, in the flood-destroyed historic city of Thatta, I meet an overworked surgeon donning seaweed green scrubs who shows me around the SIUT field hospital and mobile clinics. "We set off with a van and ask if there are any ill people," explained Dr Rehan Mohsin. "They come to [us] and we distribute oral rehydration packages, medicines, and anything else needed." Back in Karachi, I speak with a fashion designer named Yousuf Bashir Qureshi who is one of many Pakistanis taking flood relief efforts into their own hands. Immediately after the floods, Qureshi sent out a personal appeal to his family and friends: "please come under one flag—the Pakistani flag—and for the sake of humanity." Soon, Qureshi and his team had launched "United Pakistan" with the tagline, "Rescue, Relief, Rehab, and Rebuild." He transformed three empty warehouses into storage spaces for relief supplies and converted his artists' commune into an auction room where photographers, painters, and sketchers donated their work for charity.

The next day, I fly to the third largest city in the Sindh province, Sukkur, which is situated on the west bank of the Indus River. I spend the day with a Pakistani philanthropist named Afzaal Shaikh, a wildlife photographer and dolphin conservationist who runs a construction business in Karachi. Shaikh, a burly man with a broad build and moon-shaped face, jumped into action when he learned the floodwaters were rapidly approaching his city. Shaikh started an organization, "V Need U", which defrayed the cost of Sukkur's main hospital and provided free food, medicine, and shelter for 3,000 people in an IDP camp that Shaikh continues to run today off Airport Road in Sukkur.

I spend the remainder of my time in Pakistan's rugged northern region. Unlike in the south where the floodwaters slowly and stealthily supersaturated entire villages, in the north the floodwaters raged through the

steep mountains with the ferocity of a derailed train. Today, parts of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province region still resemble a warzone: battered bridges, crushed schools, and leveled villages. Instead of bullet holes, there are watermarks.



In Islamabad, I meet the staff of the Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation (OAKDF). They are striving to build a democratic and peaceful society based on the values of equity, tolerance and justice in which all people are assured a life of dignity and quality. The foundation works with citizens, particularly the poor and vulnerable, to promote both political and socioeconomic justice for Pakistanis across class strata. Through town hall meetings, OAKDF encourages citizens to engage with the state to reform institutions and revamp policies. The foundation promotes skill building workshops, credit provision programmes, micro-finance plans, people participatory meetings, and community infrastructure projects. The OAKDF staff of 60 activists are building a grassroots movement through a decentralized decision making process in which power is horizontally shared.



After the floods, the foundation visited Kandian Valley and collaborated with the community to design a cash-for-work project to reconstruct pedestrian paths destroyed by mudslides. OAKDF is currently working on constructing a new suspension bridge in Dubair, Kohistan. "What we've seen work very well is collaborating with the people affected by the disasters as equal partners," explained Rashida Dohad of OAKDF. "We established principles and guidelines such as trust-building and community empowerment opposed





to giving out tokens [such as dropping food parcels from helicopters]. We believe our approach is more effective and it allows displaced people to preserve their dignity.”

En route from Islamabad to Charsadda with OAKDF staff, we drive past smashed schools and collapsed homes. “The floods were a natural disaster but linked to that is the state’s failure to invest in vital infrastructure such as dams and canals, which would have made the flood less devastating,” explains Dohad. We stop at a union council in Utmanzai, Charsadda that OAKDF set up to help community members voice their hopes and frustrations in wake of the flood. In a dimly lit room with a mud floor, we meet with a group of seventeen



women who range from young adults to grandmothers. “The people we voted for did not come until five days after the flooding,” complains an elderly woman wrapped in a colorful shawl. More recently, OAKDF has organized art therapy classes in Charsadda to help children cope with anxiety resulting from the flood. “In our



psychosocial session for children, we ask them to draw what they fear most,” explained Dohad. “Many of the drawings are full of blue, full of water.”

The next day, I embark on a nine-hour trip with OAKDF staff members, Mumtaz Tanoli and Hassan Ali Khan, to the northern district of Kohistan. Quite aptly named, Kohistan means “land of mountains” in Persian. We zigzag through jagged roads, abruptly halting and speeding as the potholes dictate. Driving past a pile of rubble, Ali notes: “People built a 18 kilometer road and electric plant here, but now nobody can believe there was anything here before the floods.” After the raging floodwaters demolished a bridge between Shangla and Battagram, OAKDF helped install a cable car so villagers could cross the Indus River. We stop in Battagram, catch a ride on the cable car, and speak with locals benefiting from the new form of transportation. “We are very happy and grateful,” says an



elderly man with a fluffy beard and discolored snaggletooth.

Shortly before leaving Pakistan, I speak with CNN correspondent Reza Sayeh over green tea in Islamabad. Sayeh notes that, “Pakistan is seen as dangerous and scary to many Americans.” With a tinge of irony, he continues, “The US mainstream media exaggerates violence in Pakistan” and drowns out the voices of ordinary Pakistanis. “We report fanaticism as if it’s the only story,” he says. As a journalist, I am painfully aware the media is interested in what’s most sensational, what’s most likely to sell. I am extremely grateful I had the opportunity to visit Pakistan and witness the other side of the story that rarely catches world headlines. And, that is the story of a nation full of warm-hearted and generous people who are elbow-deep in the nitty-gritty work of rebuilding their country, bridge-by-bridge and life-by-life.

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Photographs : Deena Guzder / Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting



The World Zoroastrian Organisation

## WZO assists flood victims of Pakistan

The 2010 Pakistan floods began in July following heavy monsoon rains in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, Punjab and Balochistan regions of the country. United Nations estimates that more than 21 million people are injured or homeless as a result of the flooding, exceeding the combined total of individuals affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 Kashmir earthquake and the 2010 Haiti earthquake. At one point, approximately one-fifth of Pakistan's total land area was underwater due to the flooding. [source Wikipedia].

by *toxy cowasjee*

On 24<sup>th</sup> August, nearly a month after the crisis began, WZO solicited donations in order to help the victims primarily giving aid to SIUT, as they were treating and distributing medicines in all four provinces. The delay in taking action was due to the extensive area of the flood, too many individuals rendering assistance, and relevant question - how best to achieve results. Earlier, individuals did approach me and were directed to send their donations to Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation, if they wished, having worked so closely and effectively with them after the earthquake of 2005.

Flyers were sent off through out the world to all the people whom I knew would assist if they could, both to Zoroastrian organisations and individuals. Our Chairman, Mr Motiwala informed our members wherever email addresses were available.

Report written on 24 September after visiting various locations on 17<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> September.

I was planning to go and see various places much earlier, but Deena Guzder an Independent Journalist who has written for Hamazor and met once in Houston, contacted me saying since she was at present in Kathmandu could I arrange a trip for her so that she could interview the displaced persons and write about the situation prevailing at present. Various publications have since

asked Deena to write which will hopefully open the minds of individuals. I invited her to stay in our home and travel with me wherever I had planned to go.

Our first stop was at the camp set up by a group of individuals, headed by known past governor of Sindh and retired Supreme Court Judge – Fakruddin Ibrahim, the Trust being registered as Aitemaad Pakistan. The camp was half way to Makli on the main road between Dhabeji and Gharo which is in Thatta district. Their local volunteer, Mr Ahmad Mazari, arranged by Zahid Ibrahim, was there to show us around and answer any questions. The large tents had been donated by the Swiss Red Cross suitable for a family of even eight with ground sheets, being the only camp which we visited having this facility. Tents were pitched in straight lines, with large walking spaces between rows. Food rations are given out to each family on a weekly basis which is then managed by themselves – cooking as they wish. Utensils, clothing, charpois [local bed] were allocated to the displaced as they arrived, whereas fresh water is brought daily in tankers and supplied to all. Large water containers are all along the rows of tents for the people to use for washing and drinking. A separate tent with a medical practitioner where people can come for immediate treatment, and those who are more serious are transported to the closest hospital by ambulance. The common problem seen





everywhere was scabies, diarrhea, malnutrition and some suffering from malaria. In this well run camp where contentment was obvious, the men were mainly fishermen, a few labourers, barbers and carpenters.

Our next stop was the SIUT medical camp at Makli where the present exodus is reaching from middle Sindh. *[on 17<sup>th</sup> this was the case but the dire situation in October is Sehwan, Dadu and environs]*. SIUT have taken over a small government building which they have converted into their lab, scanning room etc. Outside on a narrow strip of grass, three large tents have been set up. The middle tent is for the doctor on duty who attends to any out-patients, with full treatment being given at one time saving the patient to return daily. The other two tents are used for keeping patients who need more supervised treatment. The serious cases are sent by ambulance, to the main SIUT hospital at Karachi.



As there were no out-patients at the time, the two doctors came with us to visit the Saudi run camp and hospital. Enroute, tent camps stretched for about five miles, being methodically arranged by the army to be run either by NGOs or private parties. The Saudi run hospital which was housed in the army barracks and reputed to be state of the art, unfortunately we were not permitted to enter. The camp for the refugees was opposite which seemed to be receiving all the necessary aid and though the lanes in between the tents were more spacious than elsewhere, they too had no ground sheet and only the earth to sleep / sit on.



The SIUT run a mobile medical facility twice daily in Makli, parking at a site where people can come easily. Here we saw quite a few people though no more than 70, but were informed an average of 700 people are treated daily.

All along the way from outer Karachi to Makli / Thatta, we saw unauthorised tents on both sides of the road, some genuine refugees, some capitalising on the situation

and generosity of people. *[Update: as SIUT do not require funds for purchasing medicines for the flood victims at present, I have diversified the donations]*.

On 19<sup>th</sup> early morning we flew from Karachi to Sukkur via Mohenjodaro. As we approached Mohenjodaro we could see the extensive flooding. The raging river had abated now flowing peacefully, having made many incursions and destruction. At Sukkur, a friend of my daughter's Afzaal Shaikh, who is from this area but lives in Karachi, was our able guide for the day. Afzaal, is a giant of a man both in stature and heart. He has set up two camps, which are definitely the best in this city with his own resources and that of some friends. Now they need monetary assistance or commodities in kind. Weekly rations are handed out, treatment for every ailment is on hand having volunteer doctors coming daily who specialise in eyes, stomach, or general problems. A large tent where an equally large blackboard has been placed, making a temporary school for the children who are about 800. They attend daily for lessons both in Urdu and a bit of English and when the children leave they are given biscuits, juice packets and chocolates. In this camp the food is very generous, with meat or chicken once a week, as well as vegetables, flour, rice, pulses and clean water. A volleyball court has been set up where they play under floodlight with the amazing young men who are volunteering their time. Football and board games are also supervised. All refugees are registered when they arrive with name, age and national ID number. While driving around Sukkur, we saw SUVs or jeeps which had trailers containing fresh water hooked on, supplying to camps and to individual pitched, courtesy of "V need U" or Afzaal Shaikh.

In the grounds of the Civil Hospital the Canadians had set up a large enclosed capsule, obviously brought with them, complete with airconditioning to treat cholera patients. They had worked here most effectively for some weeks leaving behind a grateful community but before

departing, teaching the doctors from the Indus Hospital, Karachi, how to manage this deadly disease.

We drove to the Sukkur Barrage and over the Rohri Bridge where the river had been 30 feet high which was hard to imagine now. While driving from one location to another, Afzaal showed us the Sukkur agiary and another building which must have been a dharamsala, in total neglect, housing squatters in the spacious grounds of 6000 sq yds. The engraved sign on the agiary building was still there, though with missing words and above the words 'Mama' was the very prominent farohar. The adjacent building had 'Marker' inscribed, and on the same road was the old Parsi colony, now owned by others.

On 20<sup>th</sup> we flew to Islamabad where we were welcomed by my friend of post earthquake days, Ali Asghar Khan and some team members of OAKDF at their office. Soon thereafter we left for Charsadda which took well over three hours to reach, though travelling on good surfaced roads. Charsadda is the district adjacent to Nowsherra having suffered the same outcome due to flooding. To explain how areas work in Pakistan, we have a district, in it is a Union Council, in which there are towns, and hamlets known as 'mohalla'.

Destination was Mohalla Saadat, UC Utmanzai, Charsadda. This mohalla is tucked away and approached by small lanes, all destroyed now, and as we drove we could see houses ravaged, though made from red brick and even some sturdy concrete ones. Main exterior walls were gone with gaping large expanses now remaining. Some people were remaking their walls, some still camping in their own territory in tents, but nothing was left whole. This was due to the flooding of the Jindi River (colloquially called a nullah, literally a trickle normally), which is a tributary of the main Kabul River that meets the Swat River and flows into the Indus at Attock. Deena has already mentioned the meeting of women and children. Our next stop was to see the rural damage at Mohalla Chena, UC

Mirza Dher - just miles of water logged sugar cane fields destroyed. One cannot fathom how strong and fast these rivers must have flowed till one physically sees the destruction left by them.

Twenty-first morning, our long but interesting trip to Kohistan which began at 7am and ended at 9:30pm at Abbottabad, where we were staying in Ali's office to save further hours commuting to Islamabad. At last I was going to a territory which has been on my "wish list", via the Karakorum Highway; carved through the mountains by the Chinese and the Pakistan army to China between the years 1958-78 and considered a modern wonder of the world. "Highway" as the West may conjure in their minds should not be taken literally. It is a surfaced road enabling to and fro heavy traffic to move safely which is used mainly for trade. After leaving Battagram, the road was more or less running parallel to the river and we could see the havoc caused. The land had receded by double, the watermarks of the flooding was visible, and the huge river stones weighing hundreds of kilos, had been left behind all over the landscape.

Our stop was at Kund, where 18 bridges have been swept away, the only means of commuting. At present with all walking tracks lost, people take from four to six days to come from their homes to the road. The solid concrete bridge had collapsed into pieces, but no sooner the people had made a "cage" of sorts, which was suspended on rope, produced from where I don't know and manually operated across the river. One cannot help but admire their courage for improvising a means of crossing where the river had turned into a rapid at a height of 100 feet. Ali and his team were the first to arrive at this site to render help and a cable car was installed, operating on cable wire with a truck engine having gears. Very basic, but safe and effective. The cable car has been handed over to the committee to run themselves now, which is greatly appreciated by the Union Council. And then the fun part, going across in the cable car and returning – just terrific and so fast, high up in the air across a vast span! Our last





stop was the beginning of the Dubair valley in Kohistan where the Dubair nullah destroyed the whole market, bridge, road, and taking away a large section of the land. This area is part of Tehsil Pattan of District Kohistan. While this destruction was taking place a villager took a video on his mobile phone which he has given to Ali. The link where you may watch this scene is:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFS-dY1\\_FUA&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFS-dY1_FUA&feature=related)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yotH0CnFGk&feature=related>



Once again Ali with his team were the first to come here with food and basic necessities, which they are still supplying. The only way these people have managed since ever, has been walking on their tracks either for basic needs or moving their livestock. These having gone now, they have to scale the Karakorum mountains till someone renders help with the remaking of countless tracks, as Kohistan is a forgotten area of Pakistan.

Websites of the four worthy NGOs mentioned in the report is shared. We are blessed with countless good Samaritans who quietly carry on doing whatever they can. We are not all terrorists or corrupt as Pakistan is popularly pictured.

Omar Ashgar Khan Development Foundation – <http://www.oakdf.org.pk>  
SIUT - <http://www.siut.org/index.php>  
Aitemaad Pakistan – <http://www.aitemaad.pk/>  
V Need U – <http://www.vneedu.com>



WZO gratefully acknowledges and thanks each donor for coming forward to assist enabling us to help the less fortunate. GBP 2,332.48 is with WZO in UK which will be transferred to Pakistan. **Rs3,650,102/- [average rate taken: GBP 27,239 or US \$ 42,942] is the amount received by me till 15 October, primarily from overseas,** from which the following has already been given for:

✓ Rs500,000 for two portable ultra sound machines to SIUT on 2 September, sent to the Makli medical camp and one to Sehwan.

✓ Rs200,000 for Lifestraw-family units on 14 September which gives good potable water without the use of electricity or batteries. This amount has been matched by United Bank who are a private bank in Pakistan. 157 units have been purchased and will be sent by UBL on our behalf to remote areas of Sindh. Check out: <http://www.vestergaard-frandsen.com/lifestraw/lifestraw-family/features>

✓ Rs30,000 to OAKDF on 22 September, to hold therapy sessions for children in various locations where relief work is being carried in Charsadda & Nowsherra districts.

✓ Rs400,000 to OAKDF on 22 September, to build a wooden jeep-able bridge at Dubair Valley, Kohistan, work to commence week of 18<sup>th</sup> October.

✓ Rs1,100,000 to OAKDF on 14 October, to complete the 7.31 km jeep-able track in the Dubair Valley, which will link three Union Councils having more than 30,000 people. Half the amount has been paid now, balance on completion. The people themselves have already made tracks with their bare hands of 13 km and now need this assistance to complete their 'road'. The project will take 6-8 weeks to complete. This has been made possible through the generosity of ZSO & OCZF of Toronto, Canada who collected funds from their community for the flood relief.

There is much to be done but together we can achieve!

Donations may be sent by bank transfer direct to :

Mrs Hutoxy Cowasjee WZO, a/c No: 18-1049259-01, Standard Chartered Bank, I.I. Chundrigar Road, Karachi 74000, Pakistan. Swift Code SCBL PPKX. Please inform me by email: [toxy39@gmail.com](mailto:toxy39@gmail.com) so that I may follow up my end.

Or to: Cheques payable 'WZO' and sent to the Chairman, WZO, 135 Tennison Road, South Norwood, London SE25 5NF, for UK residents. For overseas: By Bank Transfer to HSBC account; Sort Code 40-44-51, Account No 71455982, Account Name WZO. Swift Code MIDLGB2159J. The IBN is GB94MIDL followed by the Sortcode 404451 and the Account no 71455982.



*Aitemaad Pakistan - Dhabeji camp* - [photographs : Deena Guzder / Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting]



Tent life



Tanker water being supplied daily



Visit to the camp doctor



Cooking on village style stove



Baby on the mend after fall from 'joola'



Being treated for severe scabis



Good quality cooking utensils

*SIUT medical camp, Makli* - [photographs: Toxy Cowasjee]



Outpatients arriving at SIUT camp. [Deena Guzder]



Tent for outpatients



Above left: Doctor sorting medication for mobile van, right: boy being administered a drip for dehydration at the camp. Bottom row : people crowding for attention from doctors on Mobile van, facility given twice daily.

sponsored by late Nariman K Irani & his wife Franey

*Sukkur & VneedU camp* - [photographs : Afzaal Shaikh]



Exodus entering Sukkur



Rescuing old man afloat on his 'charpoi'



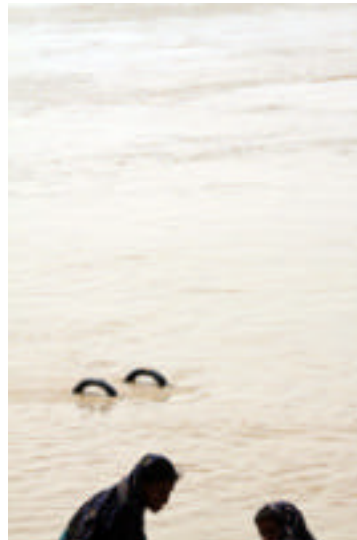
Children crossing river on their buffalo



Flooding of Sukkur Barrage



Centuries old historical site, flooded



Immediate right: children's playground under water, seen are the two top bars of the slide. Far right above: children taking shelter under 'charpoi', below: Afzaal fed people daily along the high river bank during Ramadan.

Photographs appearing from pp50 -62 may not be used without permission.



'VneedU' SUVs



'VneedU' camp with school & volley ball area being centre point



'VneedU' free water supply for displaced persons



'VneedU' camp school



Mother with new born son after losing three babies at birth. Born a day before our visit at 'VneedU' camp

**Charsadda** - [photographs : Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation]



Aerial view





1st row: Mohalla Saadat,  
2nd row: Mohalla Chena -  
destruction of crops.

photographs: Deena  
Guzder / Pulitzer Center on  
Crisis Reporting



**Kohistan** - [photographs : Deena Guzder / Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting]



Destroyed bridge at Kund



Cable car erected by OAKDF at site of destroyed bridge,  
Kund. The tall structure right of car was completely  
submerged during the flooding - 100ft height, [see below  
middle - OAKDF]. Deena & Toxy going across in cable car.



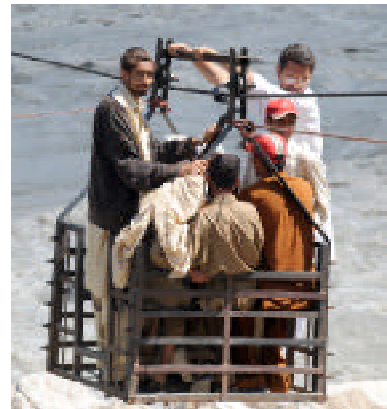
[photographs : Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation]



Landsliding on Karakoram Highway



Riding the 'dollie' - a wooden small platform to get across the river



Manual operated cage for crossing the river at Kund



One man's courage - building a 'bridge' using the fallen pylon and wires, so people may cross over



Another 'bridge' made by the people after the flood



Beautiful Dubair before the flood



Damaged bridge at Dubair



Dubair , what is left after the flood

sponsored by late Nariman K Irani & his wife Franey



Dubair Bela bridge for pedestrians, under construction, below - completed by OAKDF early October



Tracks are gone, people find alternative ways of carrying relief goods back home or to bring the sick to the nearest point of transport.



Two portable ultra sound machines purchased and given to SIUT to be used in their medical camps for flood displaced persons. Rs500,000/.



Lifesraw-family units for flood affected persons in Sindh. 157 units for Rs200,000 matched amount by UBL Pakistan.

Above two photographs show the site in Dubair Valley where the jeepable track is to be constructed by OAKDF on behalf of WZO. The jeepable bridge will connect up with the track making a complete project costing Rs1,500,000/-