

# The Attabad landslide and the politics of disaster in Gojal, Gilgit-Baltistan

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## 1. Introduction

On 4<sup>th</sup> of January, 2010, a gigantic mass of rocks came down the slope above Attabad, a village in the high mountain area of Gilgit-Baltistan, northern Pakistan. The large-scale landslide filled the narrow valley of the Hunza-River, burying part of the village and the neighbouring hamlet of Sarat. It did not come unanticipated. Already years before widening cracks had appeared on the slope. Attabad had been evacuated but a number of families returned. The landslide claimed nineteen lives. While this was disastrous enough, a second disaster developed in consequence of the first. The debris created a huge barrier of more than hundred metres height and one kilometre width which completely blocked the flow of the Hunza-River and also buried the Karakorum Highway (KKH), the only road link to the area. Consequentially, the whole area upstream, the *tahsil* (subdistrict) of Gojal, was cut off from access to Pakistan. In the subsequent weeks a lake developed behind the barrier which continued to grow till August 2010. Until then it had reached a length of almost thirty kilometres. The lake inundated one village completely and four others partly. Large sections of the KKH came under water so that also communication between the villages was severely disrupted.

A growing body of literature of the anthropology of disasters has pointed out that “natural disasters” are in fact not simply “natural”. Taking mostly a political ecology perspective which emphasises the close connection, interdependency and, practically, mutual constitution of “nature” and “society”, it has been argued that disasters occur when events that are characterised as being “natural” (i.e. not man-made) impact upon vulnerable human, social spaces. The concept of vulnerability, in a nutshell, provides the link between the “social” and the “natural”. “... Vulnerability is the conceptual nexus that links the relationship that people have with their environment to social forces and institutions and the cultural values that sustain or contest them”, writes Anthony Oliver-Smith (2007: 10). It is always a particular complex of social, political, and cultural

configurations that makes people in particular places vulnerable to specific events.

Many of the people who are affected by the Attabad landslide hold a slightly different view of the relationship between “natural” and “man-made” disasters. For them, the disaster was natural in the beginning but subsequently turned into a man-made disaster. According to their perspective it became a man-made disaster because insufficient steps were taken by the regional and national authorities to prevent more damage. In local discourse about the Attabad disaster, references to “government” abound. In local perspective, the disaster has a very close connection with the political sphere. This chapter explores interconnections between “disaster” and “politics” in the case of the Attabad landslide. It focuses more on the second part of the disaster, the inundation of the villages, than on the first, the burying of Attabad village.

Prominent examples of anthropological studies of disaster have pointed out that in many cases the impact of a cataclysmic event initially erases social structure. Immediately after the impact social differences like class and hierarchy (probably to a lesser extent perhaps also gender) often give way to a liminal phase of *communitas* and solidarity (Oliver-Smith 1999; Schlehe 2006). If we take the convenient categorization of post-disaster action and experience into the three phases of “rescue”, “relief” and “reconstruction”, it is the rescue phase which is frequently characterised by solidarity and a lack of discrimination. Social structure is restored after a certain time, often with the onset of relief operations. While social differentiation re-emerges with relief it seems that political action related with disaster is more often connected with reconstruction efforts. In the story of the Yungay earthquake and landslide Anthony Oliver-Smith narrates that political mobilisation of the victims started in opposition to government’s resettlement plans (Oliver-Smith 1986: 203ff.). Both Oliver-Smith and Schlehe write that interventions of agents from outside the affected community play a significant role in the re-emergence of social order and in the inception of political mobilisation.

In the case of the Attabad landslide and lake, however, things were different. The inundation of villages was not a sudden, unreckoned event that took the affected villagers by surprise. To the contrary, the disaster approached slowly in the shape of the daily rising waters of the newly formed lake. Many people told me that from day one after the landslide they expected their houses to be inundated. They had time to cope with the anticipated flooding. Although solidarity with the victims played an important role in the affected villages, there was apparently no phase of undifferentiated *communitas*. Instead, political action started almost immediately after the impact of the event.

I use a quite conventional understanding of “politics” in this chapter. While in much anthropological writing the concept of “politics” has been extended to refer to all kind of power relations, including, for instance, power relations

within the “private” realm of the family, I limit my discussion to the sphere of public action in relation with government. This does not mean that I regard other realms of action, like those within the family, as non-political, but simply that there is sufficient “conventional politics” to be discussed in relation to the Attabad disaster.

My analysis of the disaster is based on two short research trips of altogether five weeks duration to Gilgit-Baltistan and Gojal in November 2010 and February 2011.<sup>1</sup> In the affected area I stayed in the village Gulmit which is the administrative centre of the sub-district Gojal. Reports on the Internet blog *Pamir Times* are a very important source, too. Further, my understanding is informed by my general acquaintance with Gilgit-Baltistan which started from my doctoral fieldwork in Gilgit in the early 1990s.

This article proceeds as follows: First I will introduce the area and the people affected by the landslide. Then I will narrate with more detail the unfolding of the disaster, the ways, in which people were affected and attempted to cope with it, including relief efforts by government(s) and non-governmental organisation. After that I will detail and analyse political action that emerged with the disaster but was “rooted” in pre-disaster political dynamics.

## 2. Gojal and Gilgit-Baltistan

Gojal is a sparsely populated arid high mountain area spread over 8,500 km<sup>2</sup>. Villages are situated at an altitude between 2,300 and 3,200 meters. The population of Gojal is around 20,000 people.<sup>2</sup> Settlements are found in the main valley which is formed by the Hunza-River and in the side valleys of Shimshal and Chupursan. The main valley was connected by the KKH which runs alongside the Hunza River and crosses into the Chinese Province of Xinjiang over the Khunjerab Pass at an altitude of 4,690 m. The KKH is the only road link between Pakistan and China. The valley of Shimshal has a road link with the KKH and the main area of Gojal only since 2003. Economy in the area is largely agrarian. Cultivation depends on irrigation which is fed by melt water from glaciers.

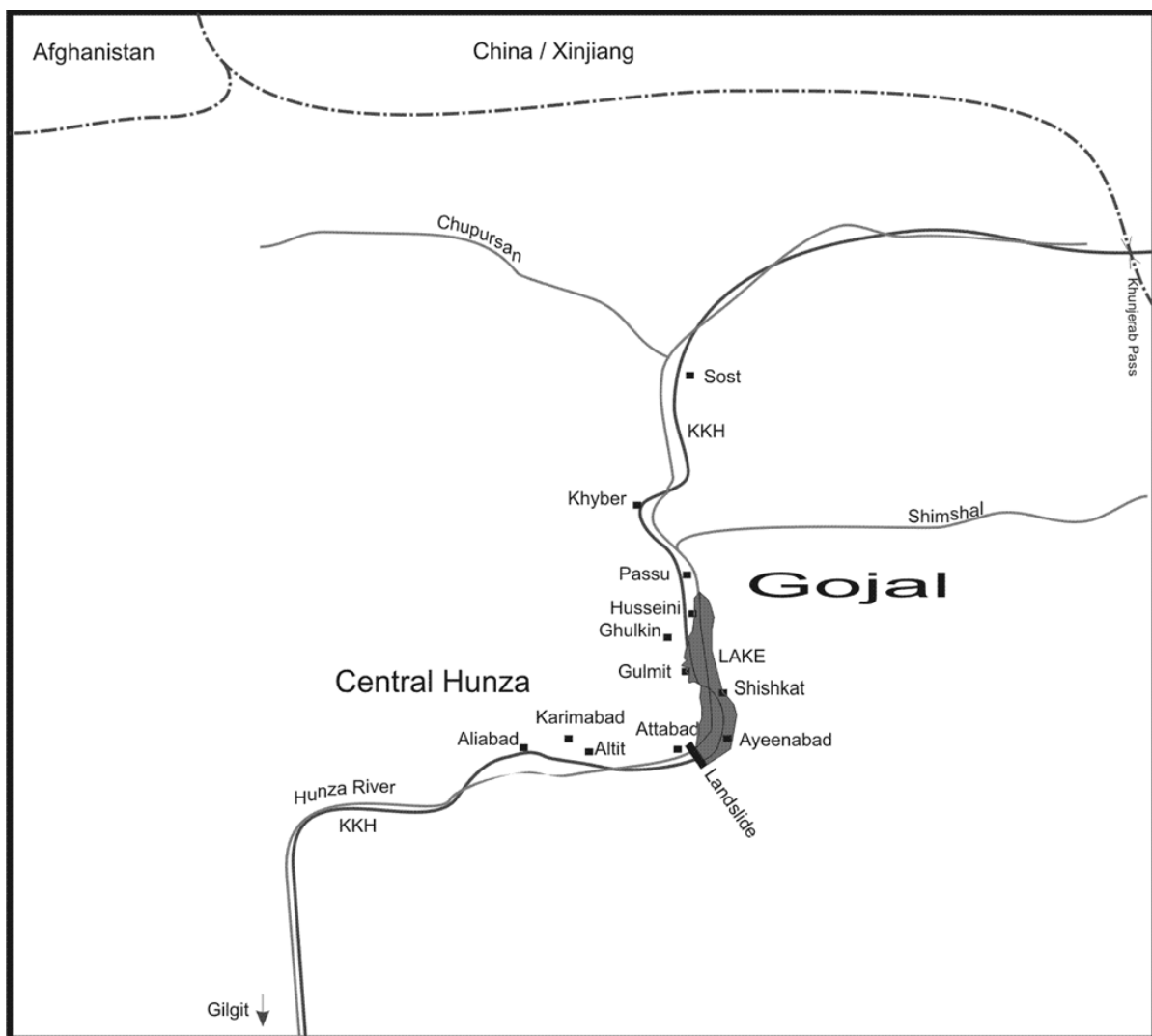
While it would be wrong to insinuate that the area had been completely isolated before the opening of the KKH in 1978, it is certainly true that the Highway had a very important impact on society in terms of links and communica-

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1 Without the help of many friends from the area such a short period of research would have produced very meagre results. I am particularly indebted to Fazal Amin Beg, Adil Shah and Zulfiqar Ali. The responsibility for any flaw of the article is, however, entirely mine. I am also indebted to the Swiss National Science Foundation for funding the trips.

2 Some documents give a population figure of more than 25,000, but this probably includes many people who have migrated from Gojal and now live in different cities of Pakistan.

tion. The Highway brought a significant transformation of economy in Gojal.<sup>3</sup> While before the opening of the KKH economy was largely nonmonetary and subsistence-oriented, transport facilities enabled the cultivation of cash crops. Before the disaster, the cultivation of potatoes was the most important source of income in Gojal. Other significant road-related sectors of economy were tourism (including trekking tourism) and small-scale trade with China. The Highway also facilitated migration to down-country Pakistan for the purpose of work and education. The KKH formed the backbone of economy in Gojal, yet the road link was always precarious. Because of the hazardous high-mountain environment landslides and rockfalls that block the KKH consecutively for days or even weeks are quite common.



Sketchmap of Gojal (not to scale).

3 On social changes brought by the KKH see Kreuzmann 1991.

Politically, Gojal is part of Gilgit-Baltistan. In consequence of the Kashmir dispute, the region which until 2009 was called “Northern Areas of Pakistan” is under the control of Pakistan yet does not form a constitutional part of this country. After 1947, Gilgit-Baltistan was considered a “disputed area” the inhabitants of which have no right to participate in Pakistan’s formal political processes. Most importantly, they do not have the right to cast their votes in elections for Pakistan’s National Assembly (Sökefeld 1997a, 2005).

Until the 1970s, parts of Gilgit-Baltistan were administered by more or less autonomous local rulers. Gojal was part of the small kingdom of Hunza under the rule of the Mir of Hunza. The kingdom was divided into three parts: Shinaki, Central Hunza and Gojal. Hunza society was characterized by a strict hierarchy in which the lower strata were required to pay heavy agricultural taxes and to provide forced labour to the king. Central Hunza was the most privileged part of the state as taxation was considerably higher in Shinaki and especially in Gojal, yet rigid stratification prevailed also in Central Hunza.<sup>4</sup>

The Mir’s exploitative regime was abolished only in 1974 by the Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Bhutto initiated a first step in a series of political reforms of Gilgit-Baltistan. In 2009, the up until now last of these reforms brought a kind of limited self-rule to the area. Since then, Gilgit-Baltistan has a Legislative Assembly and a Government under a Chief Minister who is elected by the Legislative Assembly. At present, the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) has the majority in the Assembly and like the Government of Pakistan the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan belongs to this party. Political competences of both Assembly and Government of Gilgit-Baltistan, however, are very restricted. Beside the Chief Minister there is a governor who is appointed by the federal government of Pakistan. The more important administrative and political issues are under the authority of the Government of Pakistan through its Minister of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan.

The relationship between Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan is still at issue. Most of the politically aware inhabitants of the area demand the full integration of Gilgit-Baltistan into the Pakistani State as its fifth province, beside the existing provinces of Punjab, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh and Baluchistan. With the reform of 2009, the political setup of Gilgit-Baltistan has become to some extent province-like, but still it is not a province. A vocal minority, however, rejects Pakistan completely and demands the area’s full independence (Sökefeld 1999).

Gojal is a *tahsil* (sub-district) of Hunza-Nager District. The landslide occurred at the border between Central Hunza and Gojal. Attabad is the last village of Central Hunza and the area affected by the lake falls entirely within Gojal. The principal village of Gojal is Gulmit (population ca. 2,500), the *tahsil* head-

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4 On historical social structure in Hunza and Gojal see Kreutzmann 1989: 166ff; 1996: 282ff.

quarters, which before the disaster had a bazaar of more than 130 shops. The village houses local administration and facilities like a post office, a bank and a hospital, which, however, is not permanently staffed. For many if not most services the people of Gojal depend on access to Aliabad, the principal place of Hunza, or Gilgit, the capital of Gilgit-Baltistan. Gojal is linked with both places by the KKH.

Another important village of Gojal is Sost where a dry port for China trade is situated. As long as the Khunjerab Pass is open, i.e. from May to December every year, goods are loaded from Chinese trailers onto Pakistani trucks and, to a lesser extent, vice versa at Sost. Large-scale trade with China is dominated by traders from down-country Pakistan, most importantly Punjabis and Pashtun.

Gojal is inhabited by people belonging to two ethno-linguistic groups, Wakhis and Burusho.<sup>5</sup> Wakhis form the majority and Burusho live in a few villages only. Historically, Wakhis constituted a subordinate segment of society and were subject to heavy taxation by the Mir of Hunza who himself was a Burusho. Both Wakhi and Burusho belong to the Ismailiyya, the Islamic community which is headed by the Aga Khan. Ismailis are organised through a hierarchy of Ismaili councils which provide religious and social services.

Religious affiliation is highly significant for the economic and social development of the area because it implies the very strong commitment of the various institutions of the *Aga Khan Development Network* (AKDN). For many individuals in Gojal and Hunza, the commitment to AKDN has a strong connotation of moral obligation towards the Aga Khan.

The most important of these institutions is the *Aga Khan Rural Support Programme* (AKRSP) which started to work in Gojal in 1983 by initiating the voluntary self-organisation of the local population into *Village Organisations* and *Women's Organisations* (VO/WOs).<sup>6</sup> VO/WOs are groups who collect savings and give loans to their members for business, educational or health purposes. The VO/WOs of several villages together form *Local Support Organisations* (LSOs) which undertake larger projects with the help of AKRSP.

Different kinds of formal voluntary organisation have become very common in Gojal. For example, there is in almost every village a community school which is organised and funded by the parents. These schools are generally believed to be of higher standards than government schools. While the language of instruction in government schools is Urdu, community schools are mostly English medium schools. Compared to other parts of Pakistan, the level of education in Gojal and Hunza for both females and males is extraordinarily high. In the younger generation, the literacy rate reaches hundred percent. The value of edu-

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5 Beside there is a very small minority of Domaki-speaking people, comprising a few households only.

6 On the work of AKRSP in Gilgit-Baltistan see Wood, Malik and Sagheer 2006.

cation was very successfully inculcated by AKDN and most parents shun no efforts to provide their sons and daughters with a good education. Many young Gojalis study at universities in Gilgit, Rawalpindi, Lahore, or Karachi.

### 3. After the landslide: the unfolding of disaster

The impact of the landslide of 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2010 was immediately felt in many parts of Gojal. A large cloud of dust emerged from Attabad and reached even Gulmit at a distance of around 15 km. When people rushed to the site and saw the magnitude of the landslide, they were immediately worried. They realised that they were cut off from Pakistan and anticipated the formation of the lake which would threaten their villages. Fazal Abbas, a villager from Ayeenabad which is only a few kilometres from the site of the slide, told me that he and his co-villagers immediately started to prepare for the disaster. They moved their possessions to the upper parts of the village, dismantled the houses in the lower part in order to save precious construction materials like wooden beams and door frames and even cut the trees. About twenty days after the landslide the lake reached Ayeenabad and started to submerge houses. At the same time the section of the KKH between Ayeenabad and the barrier was flooded. It was no longer possible to reach the blockade by road from the Gojal side. That time, water level was increasing by more than 0.5 meters per day.

Because the road was blocked, about two hundred people from Gojal were stranded at Aliabad in Hunza. Gojal could only be reached by helicopters. Services were provided by the Pakistani Army and the *National Disaster Management Authority*, NDMA. Yet due to difficult weather conditions and limited resources helicopter sorties were often suspended for several consecutive days. The service was not enough to provide the people of the area with all necessities. Anticipating a prolonged blockade of the KKH, Gojalis had immediately rushed to the shops and stores to acquire provisions for their households. After a few days, shops were virtually empty.

On January 10, Qamar Zaman Qaira, the then governor of Gilgit-Baltistan rushed to Hunza and delivered speeches in Altit and Gulmit, promising that the Pakistani government would take all efforts for the relief and rehabilitation of the affected people. In the last days of the month, the *Frontier Works Organisation* (FWO), an engineering body of the Pakistani Army, started to work on the blockade, attempting to cut a spillway through the debris. A provisional access road was constructed to reach the lake from the KKH across the blockade. At this time, the spillway point was still more than eighty meters above the water level and the lake had already reached a length of eleven kilometers.

In mid-February the NDMA brought some motor boats in order to transport people across the lake. Yet the boats turned out to be old, leaky and quite unsafe. In March, traders eager to resume business with China launched larger wooden

boats on the lake which also took passengers. By these boats Gojal was reconnected with Pakistan, but travel became troublesome, time-consuming and expensive.

Five villages were directly endangered by the rising water level: Ayeenabad, Shishkat, Gulmit, Ghulkin and Hussein. In late May the water started to spill over the debris. Ayeenabad was completely submerged now, as was the greater part of Shishkat. In Gulmit the low lying parts of Goze and the bazaar area along the KKH were inundated. The main parts of Ghulkin and Hussein are situated higher above the floor of the valley. Here only a few houses close to the erstwhile river were affected. Although the level of the lake had reached the spilling point it continued to rise due to increased inflow of melt-water from the glaciers during summer until end of August. The lake had a length of approximately twenty-eight kilometers then. In addition to destroying buildings, the lake also claimed fields, gardens and tree plantations. Especially many apricot and other fruit trees which play a significant role in local diet died because they do not endure wet conditions.

With reduced inflow from the glaciers in autumn, the water level receded to some extent. In Gulmit, some fields and buildings re-emerged, now covered by a thick layer of sand and silt.

Locally, two categories of disaster affected people are distinguished. *Directly affected* are all those who suffered loss of property (houses, land, shops) due to the landslide or inundation. Taking the loss of houses as indicator, around 380 families are directly affected. Because these people have lost their homes and had to move elsewhere they are also called IDPs (internally displaced persons), a designation which has become very popular in Pakistan after the displacement of thousands of people in consequence of the war between army and Taliban in Swat in 2009. Besides the directly affected IDPs there are those who are *indirectly affected* and this category comprises the whole remaining population of Gojal. They are affected by the serious consequences of disturbed transport and communication.



Houses destroyed by landslide Attabad and Sarat	141
Houses destroyed by inundation	
Ayeenabad	32
Shishkat	130
Gulmit	61
Ghulkin	7
Hussaini	10
Further losses	
shops and businesses	130
school buildings	7
trees	ca. 80,000

Losses in Hunza and Gojal due to Attabad landslide and lake formation.

Source: Early Recovery Plan and Framework for Disaster-Affected Areas of Hunza-Gojal, AKRSP 2010.

Over the summer months, a new routine of transport developed. Goods coming from China are brought from Sost to Husseinini where the KKH disappears into the lake and where mostly local workers load them onto the boats. The boat trip to the spillway takes between ninety minutes and two hours. At the spillway, labourers, mostly men from other parts of Gilgit-Baltistan, especially from Nager, unload the goods from the boats and put them on jeeps or tractors which carry them on a dirt-road across the debris down to the KKH where the goods are finally loaded on trucks. Transport rates have risen sharply because goods have to be reloaded three times. Boats coming from Husseinini are generally fully loaded and go directly to the spillway. Passengers who are taken along frequently have to sit precariously on top of the load. Boats going in the opposite direction are mostly half empty and call also at Shishkat and Gulmit to deliver goods and passengers there. Passengers from Gulmit who want to travel to the spillway often have to take a launch to Husseinini first. When I was in Gulmit in November 2010, thirty-three boats plied the lake. The cost of a trip from Gulmit to Aliabad has doubled and the travel time increased more than three-fold. Most Gojalis regard the boat trip as very risky. It is especially problematic in cases of medical emergency.

In winter, this travel routine was disturbed again. Because of extreme cold the lake froze between Shishkat and Husseinini. From the spillway, boats could only go up to Shishkat. In January, the Chinese goods were carried or dragged over the ice from Husseinini to Shishkat where they were loaded onto the boats. Due to strong winds and high waves boat services were completely suspended for several weeks from mid-January and Gojal was cut off again. Several boats were damaged or even destroyed by ice. In February, the ice broke and boat transport was resumed.



Travelling by boat across the lake (Photo: Martin Sökefeld).

#### **4. Economic consequences of disconnection**

Because in many respects life in Gojal depends on the KKH, the obstruction of transport and communication had dramatic effects. I will focus here especially on economy/agriculture and education.

Gojal is no more a self-sufficient subsistence economy. Although most families still produce part of their food themselves, economy and life depend largely on monetary income. Income opportunities, however, were badly affected by the lake. This is most obvious in the case of tourism. In the past, many Gojalis were engaged in tourism as guides and tour operators or as restaurant or hotel owners. Tourists came from Western countries and Japan. International tourism was already badly hit by terrorism in Pakistan and the country's devastating security situation. After the Attabad landslide, tourism in Gojal was reduced to zero. On one hand, tourists simply did not travel any more to the area; on the other, tourism infrastructure has also been seriously damaged. In Gulmit, all hotels except one are closed. Several hotels have been destroyed by water.

Even more significant than tourism in terms of loss of income is the effect of the lake on agriculture. Over the last decades, the cultivation of potatoes as cash crop has become the most important source of income for Gojalis. Potatoes were

bought by traders from Punjab or Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa who transported the crop to markets of down-country Pakistan. For Gojalis the profit from the sale of potatoes was sufficient to enable certain prosperity and also to meet the expenses for educating one's children.

After the landslide and the blockade of the KKH the farmers anticipated on one hand great difficulties in marketing their crops and on the other problems to import sufficient food into the area. When the agricultural season started in March, many farmers therefore decided not to plant potatoes for sale but wheat for home consumption. In Gojal, as in other parts of South Asia, potatoes are not regarded as staple food but as vegetable which is eaten in addition to staples like flat bread made from wheat, or rice. In early summer 2010 a food crisis seemed imminent because of the difficulty of food imports. It was, however, averted by food relief. In order to explain the critical situation, the coordinator of the World Food Programme, who is from Gojal himself, told me: "There was such a scarcity of food that the people started to eat their potatoes."

In spite of the much reduced supply of potatoes, traders offered only dramatically reduced rates in autumn. While one *būri* of potatoes (100 kg) had fetched more than 2,000 PKR<sup>7</sup> the year before, farmers were initially offered only 700 PKR in 2010. The traders argued that they were not in a position to pay more because they had to bear the much increased transport rates. The farmers were not in a bargaining position. At that time many of them had spent most of their savings and were desperate in need of cash; they were forced to sell their produce at almost any rate. Some farmers who were able to wait a little longer until selling their crops got around 1,200 PKR per *būri*. Because of both reduced crops and low rates, the income derived from potatoes decreased dramatically.

In Gulmit also the bazaar economy was badly hit. The central bazaar was situated along the KKH. Around 130 shops were inundated. Only few of the shops could be reopened at other places of the village. Most of the shopkeepers lost their income as did the shop owners who are normally paid a monthly rent by the shopkeepers.

Thus while on one hand most people lost much of their monetary income, local bazaar rates of most goods increased by at least thirty percent. This had dramatic effects on voluntary organisations. Almost nobody was in a position to put further savings into VO/WOs and those who had taken out loans were often unable to pay their instalments. Before the landslide the payment moral had been very good and loans had rarely been defaulted.

Many parents stopped paying their children's fees for the community schools. The headmaster of Al Ameen Model School in Gulmit told me that fees continued to be paid for only thirty percent of the pupils. While before there had been a close relationship between school and parents, most defaulting parents

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7 Ca. 17 Euro. At that time one Euro equalled 115 PKR.

now felt highly embarrassed and avoided any contact. As a consequence, the school was unable to pay the teachers' regular salaries. After negotiations, the teachers agreed to work on reduced pay; otherwise the school would have to be closed.

The disaster also contributed to a severe energy crisis. Electricity for Gojal is generated by a hydro power station in Khyber village, further up the valley. In winter, one of the two turbines working at the power station broke down. Because of the lake it could not be transported to a workshop in Gilgit for repair. In consequence, shortage of electricity increased dramatically. While before electricity had been available for roughly half the day, supply was now reduced to six hours every three days.

As was emphasised before, most parents are willing to invest much money in the education of their children. Educating one's children well is among the most important social values in Gojal. Many students are sent to educational institutions in Hunza, Gilgit, or down-country Pakistan where they do not only have to pay for tuition fees but also for boarding in student hostels. Both students and parents fear that they have to discontinue courses sooner or later if families are unable to meet expenses. For most people in Gojal, this is the most disastrous consequence of the landslide. They say that while a destroyed house can be rebuilt after some years a lost education cannot be recovered. People fear that the disaster will have lasting effects on their children's future.

Beside all the negative economic consequences of the landslide it has to be mentioned that the disaster also created some economic opportunities. Most importantly, the loading of goods at Husseini village from trucks onto the boats provides income to local men. When I visited the place in February 2011, around 120 men were involved in this work. While most of the porters at this end of the lake are from the surrounding Wakhi villages, almost none of the porters at the spillway are from Gojal. Most porters earn between 1,000 to 2,000 PKR per day. Given that the recommended minimum wage in Pakistan is presently 7,000 PKR per month this is quite a good income. When the lake was frozen and goods had to be carried and dragged over the ice to Shishkat, opportunities were even better. At that time even white-collar employees like teachers took to portering. Men were paid 1,000 PKR per tour from Husseini to Shishkat and some men were able to do five tours per day.

Another economic opportunity is the boat traffic. Up until now, however, only two of the boats on the lake are owned and operated by locals. For tourism, the lake itself might once become an opportunity. This, however, would presuppose the reconstruction of infrastructure (hotels and restaurants) and much more convenient access to the area.

## 5. Coping with rising waters

This section deals with various efforts to cope and manage with the landslide and the lake. Some coping strategies by traders (establishing a transport system across the lake) and households (planting wheat instead of potatoes) have already been referred to in the last chapter. Concerning households, the relocation of housing of IDPs has to be added. When the water approached houses in Ayeenabad, Shishkat and Gulmit families moved their households. This was a collective affair in which the directly affected families were assisted by Ismaili volunteers. These volunteers were organised by the Ismaili Council which through local *Jamaat Khanas* (Ismaili religious and community centres) announced time and place of action. The volunteers helped the affected families to pack their belongings and to either store them at a safe place or shift them to their new, temporary place of accommodation. Further, they cut trees and dismantled houses before they were submerged in order to save construction materials like beams and door and window frames. For the concerned families this assistance was indispensable. Many affected family members felt paralyzed and were completely unable to take part in the dismantling of their own houses. Volunteers also cared especially for women and children and kept them away from the sites of disaster in order to prevent further trauma. While IDPs from Gulmit could be accommodated in the houses of relatives within the village, IDPs from Ayeenabad and Shishkat shifted to rented accommodation in Aliabad, Central Hunza.

Besides coping efforts at the household level, there were a lot of disaster managing activities undertaken by institutions like government, NGOs, and international organisations. Even in the case of a spatially limited disaster like the Attabad landslide, which, compared with other catastrophes like the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 or the Japanese earthquake cum tsunami of 2011, affects a relatively small number of people, efforts towards disaster management create a very complex space of action in which many agents are involved. To a great extent, complexity derives from the fact that none of the institutions involved actually constitutes a clearly bounded, unified actor. Taking “government” as an example, there is the Government of Pakistan and the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan, there are governmental institutions like the *National Disaster Management Authority* (NDMA) and the army, and there are individual politicians like ministers and members of the Legislative Assembly. This complexity is often eclipsed in local discourse which mostly refers simply to “the Government”, implying not only a homogeneous institution but also a difference or even an antagonism between government and the local, affected population.

Broadly, three realms of such disaster management activities can be distinguished: First, the efforts to cut a spillway through the debris of the landslide in order to release the water; second, efforts to provide affected households with

relief goods, especially to prevent severe food crisis; and third, miscellaneous measures like a business revitalisation and a cash-for-work programme.

Efforts to cut a spillway through the debris started in late January 2010 when this task was given to the Frontier Works Organisation (FWO) of the Pakistani Army. Given the gigantic size of the blockade most local observers doubted that FWO was capable of completing this assignment. Still, while visiting the sites of disaster, politicians announced several times that the debris would be cleared within a few weeks. Most locals had much more confidence in the abilities of Chinese companies and engineers and demanded from the beginning that “the Chinese” should be engaged.<sup>8</sup> Yet this did not happen. Over the months, it became clear that FWO indeed was incapable to reach the set target. FWO succeeded in cutting a spillway through the debris, but this spillway was neither deep nor wide enough to prevent the further increase of the lake even after the spilling point had been reached. In the course of the year, the goal of action was changed. Now the idea is to lower the level of the lake by thirty meters so that most stretches of the KKH would come out of the water. In December, the Pakistani *National Highway Authority* and the *China Road and Bridge Corporation* signed a 275 million USD agreement for the reconstruction of the KKH. The project is scheduled for completion in two years, but given the hugeness of construction work involved this, too, seems hardly feasible.<sup>9</sup>

In December 2010 and January 2011, FWO completely blocked the outflow of water from the lake in order to deepen the spillway. When the outflow was opened again, water remained largely at the same level. The procedure was repeated in February/ March 2011, without much effect.

Relief efforts concerned especially the provision of food items to the affected population. I am concerned here with relief within Gojal and not with the villagers of Attabad who were shifted to camps in Altit village in Central Hunza. In spring, initial relief was provided on a smaller scale by organisations like the Pakistan Red Crescent Society and FOCUS Humanitarian Assistance, the disaster management organisation of AKDN, to the directly affected families. It is said that also the provincial government of Punjab which is headed by the Pakistan Muslim League, the main contender of the PPP, sent a few trucks with relief goods to the area but I was unable to find out, who ultimately received these goods.

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8 Chinese construction agencies have a lot of experience in the region. They built large sections of the KKH and are currently engaged in widening and reconstructing the Highway.

9 According to the agreement, seven kilometres of the KKH will be rehabilitated and seventeen kilometres have to be constructed anew. The project involves the construction of two tunnels of a combined length of 5.7 kilometers and seven high-level bridges (Chinese Embassy 2010).

Later, relief was extended to the indirectly affected people in Gojal, that is, to the whole population of the *tahsil*. End of July 2010 the Chinese government offered relief to Gojal and during September around 3,000 tons of food items including wheat flour, rice, sugar, milk powder and cooking oil were transported to Sost dry port. It is said that these supplies were enough to feed Gojal for six months. Apparently, the Chinese government had intended to send relief to the flood victims in down-country Pakistan, but as the KKH was blocked and transport was difficult the Government of Pakistan asked China to give the relief to Gojal instead. The Chinese relief was distributed through a newly formed *Relief Committee* which was established by the government of Gilgit-Baltistan. Many people allege that the committee consisted of PPP supporters only and that it favoured party allies.

The Chinese relief consignment also contained fuel (petrol and diesel) and coal. Both were meant to be given free of charge to the households. Yet only the coal was distributed; it was badly needed in winter for heating purposes. The fuel, however, was claimed by the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan. Officials told that the fuel would be sold to meet expenses of the disaster but local people generally doubted this intention. They alleged, rather, that the fuel was given clandestinely to the government's cronies and that any profit derived from its sale went into the pockets of the officials. In any case, it remained unclear how and by whom the fuel was utilized.

Already in early summer 2010 the World Food Programme (WFP) had begun to plan a relief operation for Gojal but this operation was delayed by the floods that struck Pakistan in late July and August. Because in the meanwhile the Chinese Government had started to dispatch food relief to Gojal, the WFP reduced its own package for the area in order to prevent oversupply. Nevertheless, the WFP sent food items sufficient to feed Gojal for two months. This relief was mainly financed by USAID. The distribution of the WFP relief was assigned to FOCUS. As food was to be distributed according to household size, FOCUS relied on LSOs for the preparation of lists of beneficiaries. Ismaili Volunteers also helped in the distribution of relief.

Beside the works at the spillway and the different relief operations a number of smaller measures were undertaken to alleviate the consequences of the disaster. Most of them were either initiated by or implemented through AKRSP. Before the disaster, the organisation did not have an office in Gojal, but in June 2010 an Emergency Field Office of AKRSP was established in Gulmit. The most important projects implemented through this office were a business revitalisation programme and a cash-for-work project.<sup>10</sup> The business revitalisation programme was devised by the NDMA, funded by USAID and implemented by AKRSP with the assistance of MASO, the LSO of lower Gojal. The programme

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10 For both projects and other activities of the Emergency Field Office see AKRSP 2011.

gave financial assistance to those entrepreneurs who had lost their businesses to the lake. Depending on the magnitude of their losses they received cheques worth one or two lakh PKR<sup>11</sup> which were intended to help them in restarting their enterprises. In October, 132 business owners, most of whom had lost a shop in the drowned bazaar areas of Gulmit and Shishkat, received cheques. Some of them were able to reopen their businesses in existing shop buildings which line Gulmit's polo ground or in newly built wooden cabins. While the shopkeepers were happy about the assistance, the owners of the shops buildings which had gone under water complained that they were excluded from the scheme. They argued that the shopkeepers had actually suffered little damage because they could easily shift their merchandise before the bazaar was flooded, but that the shop owners were the real victims, for the shop constructions could not be saved. Still they did not receive any compensation for their losses.

The cash-for-work programme was funded by the German *Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe* through the *National Rural Support Programme* (NRSP) and was implemented by AKRSP, again with the assistance of MASO. IDPs and (non-IDP) "ultra poor" families were the beneficiaries. One person per beneficiary household was employed for a period of thirty days at a wage of 300 PKR per day in different construction schemes. While IDPs constructed mainly cattle sheds, other beneficiaries were employed in the repair of link roads and canals. For IDPs who had shifted to Central Hunza also cash-for-training programmes were initiated in which mostly women participated. Altogether more than 400 individuals took part in this project. IDPs in Gojal were also provided with one health and hygiene kit per household.

Another measure that needs to be mentioned is the Government's subsidy for schools. Initially, the Chief Minister of Gilgit-Baltistan announced that the Government would pay the fees for all pupils and students from Gojal at educational institutions in Gilgit-Baltistan. This promise did neither include boarding costs nor expenses of students outside of Gilgit-Baltistan. Further, much less was paid than originally announced. While the Al Ayn Model School in Gulmit, taken as an example, suffered a loss of about twenty lakh PKR it received only a subsidy of ten lakh. Also the provincial government of Punjab promised to waive the fees of Gojali students at the educational institutions of Punjab but this did not materialise. Students were forced by colleges and universities either to pay or to quit.

From the perspective of the affected people, many things were promised but much less delivered. Large scale action like the relief operations by China and the WFP totally lacked coordination. In Gojal, announcements by the Governments of Pakistan or Gilgit-Baltistan were considered with mistrust and reservation. Almost all government action was connected to rumours and reports about

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11 One lakh equals 100,000.



corruption. In Gulmit and the neighbouring villages the perception of relief was mixed, at best. People told me repeatedly: “We do not want relief. We want the water to go away!”

## 6. Political action in the context of disaster

Public political action and mobilisation in response to the disaster started almost immediately after the landslide of January 4, 2010. On January 6, the *Progressive Youth Front* held a demonstration in a bazaar in Hunza against “government inaction”. On January 14, the *Rābita Committee Mutasirīn-e Gojal* (Coordination Committee of the Affected People of Gojal) was established in Gilgit. On January 27 a “Save Gojal Ralley” was held in front of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly in which both the *Rābita Committee* and the *Balawaristan National Front* participated.

On January 10, Qamar Zaman Qaira, the PPP Federal Minister of Information who was at the same time Interim Governor of Gilgit-Baltistan, came from Islamabad to visit Gulmit and Altit in Hunza where he distributed cheques to the IDPs of Attabad. On January 12, Syed Mehdi Shah, PPP Chief Minister of Gilgit-Baltistan, visited IDPs in Hunza and distributed cheques, too.

These two sets of events open an arena of public political action and mobilisation around the Attabad disaster. On one hand, members of the Government visited sites of disaster or IDP camps announcing or at times publicly distributing government aid; on the other hand non-governmental actors organised public events to highlight the plight of the disaster victims and to blame the Government for not taking sufficient interest in and action against the disaster.

As mentioned in the last section, local discourse about the disaster constructs an opposition between the local, affected population and the government. In this context, “government” cannot be understood in strictly legal terms. In local discourse, “government” does not refer to the executive authority only but included also the members of legislative assembly. The term “government” (*hukumat*) rather refers to “the body of institutionalised politics up there”, in Gilgit or in Islamabad.<sup>12</sup> Especially two members of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA) played an important role in this discourse: Wazir Baig and Mutabiat Shah. Both of them belong to the PPP. Wazir Baig is the member of the GBLA for Hunza and Gojal. He received a large number of votes from Gojal and most of the people in the area are of the opinion that without their determined support he would not have won the seat. Wazir Baig became Speaker of the GBLA. From September 2010 to January 2011 he was also Acting Governor of Gilgit-Baltistan because the previous Governor had died. Wazir Baig is from Central Hunza. Mutabiat Shah who is from Gulmit is a member of GBLA, too. He has

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12 For the “vertical” conceptualisation of politics see Ferguson and Gupta 2002.

not been elected but was appointed as “technocrat member” of the GBLA.<sup>13</sup> In local discourse, both men are considered as persons who bear a special responsibility for the area, Wazir Baig because he was elected by Gojalis and Mutabiat Shah because he hails from the area. And both were harshly criticized for not taking sufficient interest in the disaster and not raising their voices for the affected people. Although at least the technocrat Mutabiat Shah is a “local” in the strict meaning of the term, his way of (in)action after the disaster rather confirmed the discursive construction of an opposition or even dichotomy between government and the locals: Having entered the sphere of government, he neglected his local obligations.

In spite of charges that the government failed to act appropriately, there was a repertory of action by government actors to deal with the calamity. Publicly, members of government showed their concern by visiting the sites of disaster. The normal course of action went like this: A politician (minister/ MLA/ governor, etc.) arrived at the site (spillway, IDP camp in Altit, or an affected village in Gojal), in most cases by helicopter and in company of media persons, he delivered a speech to the people, emphasised what action government had already taken, made announcements about future government action and distributed some material benefit (cheques, relief) to some of the victims before leaving the scene again.

While members of government ostensibly showed their activities and their sympathy with the victims through these on-site visits, most people commented that these were “a show only”, intended to mask the government’s actual neglect and inactivity. Already an early press conference held in Islamabad on January 16, 2010, accused the government of holding expensive photo sessions instead of taking effective action. Especially in the first months of the disaster, helicopter flights for politicians’ site visits were heavily criticized because they reduced the sorties available for the transport of affected persons. As no boat service had been established at that time, air transport was needed to move people and goods between Gojal and Hunza.

The “show” did not always consist in distributing cheques. An author writing for the news blog *Pamir Times* told me that shortly before a visit of Qamar Zaman Qaira, the then Governor of Gilgit-Baltistan, to the blockade in spring 2010 the number of excavators working at the spillway had been doubled by the FWO – only to be reduced again after the Governor had left.<sup>14</sup>

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13 Two seats in the GBLA are reserved for nominated professionals or “technocrats”.

14 Stories about Qaira’s visits to the spillway have become a kind of folk genre in Gojal. At another visit to the blockade in March, Qaira announced that the government would open a spillway and release the water within three weeks. When an elderly man among the audience openly expressed his doubts in this schedule, Qaira barked at him: “Are you an engineer?” “No”, replied the man, “but I know the area and I know that this is impossible.”

Events of protest were not less frequent than the visits of members of government. Besides the three events referred to at the beginning of this section I would like to mention a few other prominent examples. Most of these events were organised by the *Rābita Committee*. On 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2010, a protest demonstration was held in Gulmit under the title of *Yom-e bedāri wa tahfuz-e huqūq-e Gojal*<sup>15</sup> in order to mark the completion of three months after the landslide. A member of the *Rābita Committee* told me that until this date there had been protests in Gilgit and in other places, but never in Gojal: “Wazir Baig and his fellows were saying that the people in Gojal were quiet, that protests were taking place only in Gilgit. Therefore we wanted to show that this was not an issue of Gilgit only but of the whole *qōm*<sup>16</sup>.” Around 400 people participated in the protest which took place in front of the *tahsildar*’s office. On the same date followers of the PPP held another public meeting in Gulmit in order to commemorate the death anniversary of party founder Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto.<sup>17</sup> My interlocutor from the *Rābita Committee* suspected that the PPP organised this meeting only after the demonstration had been announced in order to divide public attention. At the demonstration demands were raised for the release of the water and for the posting of medical doctors at Gulmit, among other things. The protesters shouted slogans against the government and a speaker threatened that the youth of Gojal would turn towards China if governments of Pakistan and Gilgit-Baltistan would not fulfil the local demands. A week later it transpired that FIRs (First Information Reports)<sup>18</sup> had been lodged against eleven of the participants of the demonstration. They were charged of blocking the KKH (which was blocked by water anyway) and disrupting social order.

Being disillusioned about the progress of the FWO’s efforts to release the water activists planned a demonstration with hatchets and shovels at the site of the spillway. On June 17, 2010, several hundreds of protestors came from both sides toward the blockade. Police tried to stop movement from Central Hunza but failed. Also the spillway was cordoned off by the police but a number of people managed to break through and started to dig with their shovels, symbolically attempting to widen the spillway and to increase the outflow of water. Digging continued the next day but it was stopped after negotiations with NDMA and the Army which promised to intensify and accelerate works. Government imposed Section 144 of the Pakistani Criminal Procedure Code in

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15 “Day of vigilance and protection of the rights of Gojal.”

16 *Qōm* is an ambiguous concept in Urdu which may refer to descent groups, ethnic or linguistic groups or the political nation.

17 After being ousted by a military coup under General Zia Ul Haq, Bhutto was put under trial and executed on 4th of April, 1979.

18 In Pakistan, an FIR is a document prepared by the police on some offence. Through issuing an FIR the process of criminal prosecution is set in motion.

Hunza which bans assembly of more than five persons in public. The Home Secretary of Gilgit-Baltistan, Asif Bilal Lodhi, termed the protestors as “agents of the enemies of Pakistan” and threatened them with detention and criminal cases.<sup>19</sup>

A final example of protest which I would like to mention was the first anniversary of the landslide which was announced as “Black Day”. On 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, protest meetings were held in Gulmit, in Central Hunza and in Gilgit. Section 144 was imposed on Hunza again but protest meetings could not be prevented. In many places, a *qarardār* (resolution) was proclaimed and distributed in which the demands of the *Rābita Committee* were listed. In Gulmit, a demonstration took place in front of the *tahsil* office, speeches against the Government were delivered and tyres were burnt on the ice of the frozen lake. FIRs were issued against all speakers at the protest in Gulmit.

Protest action was not limited to the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan. Since the 1960s many Gojalis have migrated in search of work and education to the cities of Pakistan, especially to Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Islamabad. A strong network of kinship and village ties connects migrants in these places with Gojalis in Gilgit-Baltistan. In many cities, Gojalis formed local associations, especially student associations, which also organised public meetings concerning the disaster. On February 23, 2010, a “token hunger strike” was initiated in Karachi and on 28<sup>th</sup> of the same month two hundred students from Gojal staged a demonstration in front of the Lahore Press Club, demanding relief and rehabilitation for the disaster victims. At least three press conferences were organised in Islamabad. Young people from Gojal also called on persons of public interest in Pakistan in order to enlist their support. In Lahore, for instance, Gojali students met with Asma Jahangir of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Further, activities were not limited to Pakistan. Also in New York migrants from Gojal organised meetings in support of the disaster victims.

## 7. The role of the media

Public appearances by government officials and protest events are performances which aimed at gaining public attention either for the government’s commitment or for the protestors’ message of government’s negligence. Accordingly, media attention was considered important and a short paragraph on media in the context of the Attabad disaster is in order. A number of protest events were explicitly held as press conferences and government officials on site-visits were usually accompanied by journalists. Yet the political economy of public attention in

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<sup>19</sup> *Pamir Times*, June 18, 2010. Available online: <http://pamirtimes.net/2010/06/18/those-widening-the-spillway-are-agents-of-the-enemies-of-pakistan-home-secretary-gb/> (accessed April 18, 2011).

Pakistan was not very favourable for the concerns of the Attabad disaster. Generally, Gilgit-Baltistan does not receive much attention in the Pakistani public sphere. Most Pakistanis have at best very dim ideas about the high-mountain area. While national TV networks did not report on the disaster for almost three and a half months, some English language newspapers like the daily *Dawn* which had a local correspondent in the area reported from the beginning.

The most important news source concerning the disaster is the Internet-blog *Pamir Times*. *Pamir Times* had been established by two young activists from Gojal, Zulfiqar Ali and Noor Mohammad, in late 2006. The blog is organised as a community, non-profit enterprise which publishes all kinds of news items related to Gilgit-Baltistan in general and Hunza/Gojal in particular. Around thirty persons based in different places are registered as “community journalists” with *Pamir Times* who supply texts, photos and sometimes short videos. With on average more than 2,000 visitors per day *Pamir Times* has become the most important online news portal on Gilgit-Baltistan. Most of its readers are based outside of Gojal. Within the region, there is no Internet café and very few inhabitants possess web compatible mobile phones or mobile internet access. Yet *Pamir Times* very effectively links Gojali migrants across Pakistan – and the world – with their area of origin.

The outreach of *Pamir Times* goes beyond its direct readership as it is used as source by other media. Especially many photographs of the disaster were appropriated by other media, often without giving proper credit, and frequently the activists of *Pamir Times* were interviewed by newspapers or TV channels. Pakistani national TV channels like *Geo* started to report about the disaster only after it had become a more direct concern for Pakistan. In March 2010 an intense debate started about a possible breach of the blockade and a sudden outburst of the lake which would inundate hundreds of villages downstream the rivers Hunza, Gilgit and Indus. Such a breach would not have been without historical precedent: In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century a landslide dammed the Hunza River at roughly the same place. That time the pressure of the dammed water broke through the blockade and a huge wave rushed down the valleys. A Sikh army which camped at Attock on the banks of the Indus was washed away.<sup>20</sup> From March on most TV channels and news networks sent their teams to Hunza and Gojal to report on the disaster and the feared danger. Yet media attention faded again when the Attabad disaster was eclipsed by the larger catastrophe of the floods that hit Pakistan from end of July 2010 onwards. Protestors hoped to revive public and media attention through the activities planned for the “Black Day” of the disas-

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20 In order to prevent such a disaster, more than 20,000 people living along the rivers were evacuated for several weeks in 2010 until it became clear that the blockade was much too massive to break.

ter anniversary on January 4, 2011. But on this day public interest was captured by the murder of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer in Islamabad.

While press and electronic media are significant for wider public attention of the disaster, news were conveyed to the more directly concerned public, i.e. most importantly people in and from Gojal, by means of text messages sent via mobile phones. Text messages informed about current developments and also called for action like participation in a protest. An exemplary text message reads like this:

Dist. Amnstn H/N has started illegal shifting of the remaining qty of 3500 begs of chinese relief atta 2 downstrm despite ban on shift of any kind of relief goods from Gojal. We strongly condemn this animity against Gojali public. Pls raise ur voice. Pls fwd all.<sup>21</sup>

## 8. Agents of protest and opposition

While it may seem natural that the people affected by the disaster criticize the government and protest against insufficient support, it is still important to have a closer look at those who protested. The first protest mentioned at the beginning of this section was organised by the *Progressive Youth Front* (PYF). The PYF is headed by Baba Jan, a political activist from Nasirabad, Hunza, who in the political context of Gilgit-Baltistan is considered a leftist and nationalist. The PYF is not an organisation of people from Attabad or from Gojal. In Gilgit-Baltistan, “nationalist” is a designation for activists and groups who challenge Pakistan’s control over the area. I mention this not to put the PYFs genuine concern for the disaster into question but rather to point out that from the beginning the politics of the Attabad disaster was framed within the coordinates of larger political contention of Gilgit-Baltistan. Even more outspokenly “nationalist”, that is, openly demanding the independence of the Gilgit-Baltistan from Pakistan, is the *Balawaristan National Front* (BNF) that together with the *Rābita Committee* organised protest in Gilgit on January 27.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to the BNF and PYF the *Rābita Committee* is a loose network of activists formed after the disaster by people from Gojal. While the BNF or other nationalist groups quite often stage protests in Gilgit, a joint event of BNF and activists from Gojal is much less likely. This is not to say that Gojalis are gener-

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21 This message circulated on March 5, 2011 and was written in typical sms-language. A “translation” of the text would read like this: “District administration Hunza-Nager has started illegal shifting of the remaining quantity of 3,500 bags of Chinese relief flour [*atta*] to downstream despite ban on shift of any kind of relief goods from Gojal. We strongly condemn this enmity against Gojali public. Please raise your voice. Please forward to all.”

22 The BNF which has split into two factions is dominated by people from Punial and Ghizer districts. On nationalism in Gilgit-Baltistan and the BNF see Sökefeld 1999, 2005.

ally content about the political system of Gilgit-Baltistan. But their goal for political change is rather the opposite of what nationalists envision: Instead of independence, people from Gojal (and Hunza in general) mostly demand the complete integration of Gilgit-Baltistan as fifth province into the Pakistani state. Gojalis, including the activists of the *Rābita Committee*, are generally representatives of what the nationalists despise as *wafadārī* (loyalism). Although the Committee sometimes cooperated with the nationalists, its activists did not share their ideology. A young activist of the *Rābita Committee* told me: “In the freedom struggle of 1947 our elders decided for Pakistan. Although Pakistan keeps us in a colonised status, we honour our elders’ decision and opt for Pakistan.”<sup>23</sup>

The *Rābita Committee* became the most important agent of protest in the context of the Attabad disaster. The common political denominator for the majority of its activists is that already before the disaster they were opponents of the current PPP-government. In the shape of the *Rābita Committee* a decade-old political antagonism came to the surface again. Many people in Gojal hold the PPP in high esteem because its founder Zulfikar Ali Bhutto abolished the oppressive regime of the Mir of Hunza.<sup>24</sup> The Mir effectively controlled the movement of his subjects and people from Gojal were generally not allowed to leave the state. During the 1960s, however, the Mir’s grip weakened to some extent and some Wakhis from Gojal who opposed his rule managed to escape to Karachi. In the city they aligned themselves with the PPP which was established in 1967.

However, not all inhabitants of Gojal were opponents of the Mir’s rule. Among his supporters were Burushos settled in Gojal, some of whom were relatives of the Mir, and also some Wakhis who enjoyed privileges, especially in terms of taxation. The Mir’s family wields considerable political influence even today and the old distinction of the Mir’s opponents versus his supporters is still relevant. The Mir’s opponents are generally followers of the PPP. Ghazanfar Ali Khan, the son of the last ruling Mir Mohammad Jamal Khan, was member of the Northern Areas Legislative Council (the predecessor of the GBLA) and also held the now abolished office of the Deputy Chief Executive of the Northern Areas. He sided with the Pakistan Muslim League and, after General Musharraf had seized power in Pakistan, with the PML-Q, that is the faction of the Muslim League which supported the military ruler.

After the PPP had won the elections of the GBLA and took government, the Mir’s supporters became “the opposition”. The opposition now dominates the

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23 On the freedom struggle of 1947 in Gilgit see Sökefeld 1997b.

24 Bhutto was the first President and Prime Minister of Pakistan who took considerable interest in Gilgit-Baltistan. It can be assumed that he intended to turn the region into a province of Pakistan. On Bhutto and Gilgit-Baltistan see Sökefeld 1997a: 290ff.

*Rābita Committee*. Although also many supporters of the PPP find it now difficult to enthusiastically defend the Government's performance of disaster management<sup>25</sup>, they mostly shun from aligning themselves with the *Rābita Committee*. Conversely, the *Rābita Committee* also tried to exclude PPP supporters, at least in its formative phase. Still, the Committee is not restricted to allies of the Mir. A few years ago, another political contestant surfaced in Gojal in the shape of the *Mutahida Qomi Movement* (United National Movement, MQM). The MQM came into being as the party of *Mohajirs* in Karachi and Hyderabad, i.e. as *Mohajir Qomi Movement* (Mohajir National Movement) but was renamed in 1997. Since then the party tries to position itself as a liberal, secular party for the whole of Pakistan and not simply as a parochial representative of Mohajir interest in Sindh. People from Hunza and Gojal who lived in Karachi established the party in these areas. Now, also followers of the MQM are part of the *Rābita Committee*. Also the first convenor of the *Rābita Committee* was a supporter of the MQM.

The *Rābita Committee* does not only criticize the PPP-government for taking insufficient action in coping with the disaster but also for corruption and for subverting local institutions. It is alleged, for instance, that the LSOs in Gojal are largely dominated by followers of the PPP. Charges of corruption refer most importantly favouritism in the distribution of relief in general and the "fraud" concerning the fuel gifted by China in particular.

However, not only PPP and government are criticized by the *Rābita Committee*. Although much less outspoken, critique is also extended to Ismaili institutions like AKDN and the Ismaili Councils. Here, the reproach is that at least initially these institutions largely kept silent in the public debate about the disaster. When in the first months after the landslide various options to prevent the flooding of Gojal were discussed and it was obvious that the government was not willing, perhaps for strategic reasons, to enlist the help of international organisations and companies, many Gojalis expected AKDN – and AKRSP in particular – to speak up for them. But AKDN kept conspicuously silent. AKDN's reluctance to raise a voice conforms to the organisation's general policy not to act openly politically and not to confront government, in other words, to "work *with* government" (emphasis added) and not against it (Najam 2006). This can be seen as a general political maxim of Ismailis in Pakistan. The spiritual head of the Ismailiyya, the Aga Khan, demands that his followers are always loyal to their respective state and government.<sup>26</sup> An important rationale for

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25 Defence of the government is rather lukewarm. For example, a staunch PPP supporter told me in an interview: "The government is assisting the [affected] people. But the process is very slow."

26 This is also an important reason for the reluctance of people in Hunza and Gojal to support nationalist organisations in Gilgit-Baltistan. It does not mean, however, that all Ismailis



this political caution is that in the country's religious and political context Ismailis occupy a precarious and vulnerable position. Ismailis are considered as being "heterodox" by many representatives of majority Islam and it has repeatedly been demanded to formally exclude them from the fold of Islam.<sup>27</sup> Society in Gilgit town is characterised by strict and often violent polarisation between Shias and Sunnis which radiates across the whole of Gilgit-Baltistan. So far, Ismailis have been successful in largely keeping aloof of sectarianism and this is another reason for keeping a low profile. Still, in a situation of extreme emergency when entire villages were drowning, many Ismailis in Gojal had expected AKRSP to offer more outspoken advocacy and support. In this context, the establishment of the emergency field office in Gulmit can be seen as an assertion that AKRSP "does not leave the disaster victims alone", as an employee of the organisation told me.

While a lot of relief work has been undertaken by AKRSP and other organisations, by China and also the government of Pakistan, the demands and expectations of the *Rābita Committee* and the affected people of Gojal are far from being fulfilled. While relief is generally appreciated, the principal demand is the draining of the water. This is also the first point in the long list of demands of the resolution published on the "Black Day" of 4 January 2011: "It has to be made sure that the water of Attabad Lake is immediately released."

Below the threshold of political activism there is the widespread feeling among the affected population of Gojal that the government does not really take interest in their calamity. *Koi pūchnewālā nahīn hai!* is a frequently heard expression of this sentiment: "Nobody cares for us!" Many people in Gojal assume by now that the government is not really interested in the draining of the lake and the recovery of lost land and houses but only in lowering of the water level to the extent that most of the KKH comes out again so that trade with China, which is the main economic interest in the area, can be resumed on its previous scale.

Some activists of the *Rābita Committee* make a connection between protest and relief operations. For them, relief is intended also to silence the protest and to divert the people's attention from their real demand, the draining of the lake. "Indeed", one activist told me in November 2010, "there was no public protest in Gojal after the Chinese relief had arrived."

In any case, to publicly stage protest was a new key in the politics of Gojal. A member of the *Rābita Committee* told me: "It is part of our culture that we accept whatever the government says. But when it turned out that all govern-

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comply with this maxim. The main leaders of the BNF, for instance, are Ismailis, too, hailing, however, from other areas of Gilgit-Baltistan.

27 This happened to the Ahmadis in 1974 who since then suffer severe discrimination and persecution in the country.

ment announcements and promises were fake we felt compelled to take to the road and to express our protest.”

A younger activist added at another occasion:

*In the beginning we had the problem that we did not know how to protest. On TV we see protests [in Pakistan] where people burn tyres and effigies and shout ‘death to so and so!’ But we never did such things ourselves. Our approach was always intellectual. We organised a meeting, invited some politician and conveyed him our demands. But this issue was so huge and our approach did not work. We had to learn to shout slogans and threats, to make much noise, etc. Unless you do this, nobody will listen and nothing will happen.*

But not everybody in Gojal appreciated this new mode of public politics. Especially elderly people were very proud of the peacefulness of the region and felt ashamed for youngsters who assembled on the road making noise and shouting slogans against the government.

## **9. Politics of disaster and the political dynamics of Gilgit-Baltistan**

According to Jenness, Smith and Stepan-Norris (2006: ix), natural disasters offer a “particularly compelling empirical window” for the examination of social processes. What, then do the politics of the Attabad disaster tell about political processes in Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan? First of all, the politics of disaster take place within a context of previous and ongoing contestations. Although the damming of the Hunza River and the development of the lake was a severe disruption of routines and brought a radically new situation, public political action continued from previous constellations. The disaster was immediately drawn into the political game of pitting opposition against government. Instead of bringing new actors to the fore, the politics of disaster rather open a new arena for an ongoing struggle between old contestants. The dominant divide of politics in Gojal and Hunza, the opposition between supporters of the PPP and the partisans of the Mir dominates the politics of disaster, too. Beyond the political context of Hunza and Gojal also the contestants in the wider political framework of Gilgit-Baltistan find a new arena in the disaster: Nationalist groups entered disaster politics, trying to find new and quite unlikely allies. Still, the disaster brought also political change to Gojal, most importantly a change in the style of “doing politics”. The self-representation of Gojal as an abode of peacefulness and loyalty was disturbed by young men shouting slogans against the government on a stretch of the KKH in Gulmit which had still escaped inundation. It is not yet clear to what extent such agitation will become part of the regular repertory of political action in Gojal, but in any case a precedent has been set. In spring 2011 there was also a public protest meeting by elderly people in

Gulmit.<sup>28</sup> A friend wrote me that this protest was staged by erstwhile supporters of the PPP who had become disillusioned about government.

Further, the politics of disaster reveal the highly ambivalent conception of government which generally pervades politics in Pakistan. The government is known to lack resources and to be weak – it is generally accepted that the army and the bureaucracy are much more powerful institutions in Pakistan than government – but still it is burdened with high and mostly unaccomplishable expectations. While on the one hand public confidence in government is very limited, it is on the other hand held responsible for almost everything. Representatives of government do little to reduce expectations. To the contrary, they continue to make all kinds of promises. Public appearances of government representatives mostly take place in a mode of *elān*, of making announcements. Thus, members of government announced that the water of Attabad Lake would be released within two weeks, that the level of the lake would soon be lowered by thirty meters, that IDPs would be resettled, or that funds for compensation would soon be released, to mention just a few examples of still unfulfilled promises.

Practically, government did not matter too much in Gojal before the landslide happened. In fact, over the last three decades AKDN had established a kind of parallel administration which cared for almost all local needs that were neglected by the authorities: education, health, rural and community development, finance, and even, to some extent, infrastructure. The people of Gojal lived in a sort of state of benign neglect by the government of Pakistan, largely untouched by many issues which dominate politics in the country. Yet the landslide brought a disaster that was too large to be handled by AKDN. People who despairingly saw the water rise to devour their fields and houses expected that government prevented the unfolding of disaster but were utterly disappointed. Many promises were not delivered and relief efforts were pervaded by another constant of politics in Pakistan: corruption.

The contestation following Attabad also shows that politics in Gojal is not territorially confined. In consequence of migration a translocal network of activists now reinforced by electronic communication developed through which political action could be extended to the major cities of Pakistan. This enables a kind of public political representation in Pakistan which, in consequence of the internationally disputed status, the area lacks in the country's formal political setup.

In the perception of many people in Gojal and in Gilgit-Baltistan in general, the status quo of being dependent on, yet unrepresented in Pakistan considerably contributes to the region's vulnerability. While the flood-affected constituencies

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28 <http://pamirtimes.net/2011/04/23/elders-of-gojal-protest-against-the-government-for-not-fulfilling-promises/> (accessed May 9, 2011).

in Pakistan can expect their representative in the National Assembly to press issues of relief and reconstruction because he or she wants to be re-elected, Gilgit-Baltistan has no representatives to put forward demands at the federal level.<sup>29</sup> The reform package which was passed in September 2009 by the government of Pakistan under the bold name of “Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self-Governance) Order” brought no relief in this respect. According to the perspectives of my interlocutors which also included PPP supporters, this package did not do more than change the name of “Northern Areas” to “Gilgit-Baltistan” and turning the Northern Areas Legislative Council into the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly, without, however adding any legislative powers.

## 10. Conclusion

Politics is a significant dimension of the Attabad disaster. In local perspective, it is largely failed politics that ultimately turned a “natural” event into human calamity, and therefore the disaster has to be approached politically, not only by technical or managerial means. Yet politics of disaster do not constitute a new, detached arena of political contention. To the contrary, it almost seamlessly blends into general competition for power in Gojal and Gilgit-Baltistan.

The question of change and continuity is a recurrent theme in the sociology and anthropology of disasters. Being events of apparently utterly disruptive nature, many researchers expected that disasters generate rapid and pervasive social change. Yet many research outcomes show that after disasters continuity largely prevails over change (Henry 2011): “Disasters do not generate change in and of themselves, but rather intensify or accelerate pre-existing patterns” (Committee on Disaster Research 2006: 166, quoted after Henry 2011: 224). The development after the Attabad landslide confirms this assessment. But continuity can also lead to escalation: On August 11, 2011, Gilgit-Baltistan’s Chief Minister Syed Mehdi Shah was scheduled to visit Hunza yet a group of angry IDPs blocked the road in Aliabad, demanding the release of funds for compensation. They confronted the Police that wanted to clear the road. A shuffle ensued in the course of which a policeman shot into the group, killing two persons and injuring three more. In response, over the next days crowds of angry protestors led by nationalist activists attacked government offices in Hunza and demonstrations took place in Gojal, Central Hunza, Gilgit, Islamabad and Karachi. The government, in turn, arrested a number of activists. Thus, the antagonism between “the

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29 However, one Member of National Assembly, Marvi Memon of PML-Q, has become a strong advocate of Gilgit-Baltistan in the Pakistani Parliament. After the disaster, Memon visited Hunza and Gojal several times and also met activists from Gojal in Islamabad. At the Pakistani national level she has become the most committed critic of the government’s disaster management.

people” and “the government” became relevant and visible to an unprecedented extent.

At the time of writing the issue is still unresolved. As those who have lost their homes due to landslide or lake have not yet been resettled, a phase of reconstruction after the disaster has not yet been reached in any meaningful sense. Rather, the phase of relief which is characterised by dependency and uncertainty about what future will bring is prolonged. It has brought, in fact, only short-term relief and in the affected areas life continues in a kind of interim phase the end of which is not yet visible. The disaster is by no means over. The Attabad case shows, then, that not only reconstruction can be pervaded by political antagonism and contradictions of interests but that already before reconstruction takes place politics can be a significant dimension of disaster – perhaps especially when relief and reconstruction efforts are perceived as being delayed and utterly inadequate by the affected people.

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### Internet Source

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**Glossary of Acronyms**

AKDN	Aga Khan Development Network
AKRSP	Aga Khan Rural Support Programme
FIR	First Information Report
FWO	Frontier Works Organisation
GBLA	Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
KKH	Karakorum Highway
LSO	Local Support Organisation
MASO	Mountain Support Organisation
MQM	Mohajir Qomi Movement, later renamed as Muttahida Qomi Movement
NDMA	National Disaster Management Authority
PKR	Pakistani Rupee
PML-N	Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz
PML-Q	Pakistan Muslim League-Qaid
PPP	Pakistan Peoples's Party
VO/WOs	Village Organisations/Women Organisations
WFP	World Food Programme