**Headline:** Connecting the Dots Between Climate Devastation and Fossil Fuel Profits

**Teaser:** As Pakistan drowns, as Puerto Rico is cast into darkness, and as Jacksonians remain thirsty, it’s past time for a climate tax on fossil fuel companies.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

What do Pakistan, Puerto Rico, and Jackson, Mississippi, have in common? They’ve all recently experienced climate-related catastrophic rains and flooding, resulting in the loss of homes, electricity, and running water. But, even more importantly, they are all low-income regions inhabited by people of color—the prime victims of climate injustice. They face inaction from negligent governments and struggle to survive as fossil fuel companies reap massive profits—a status quo that United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has [called](https://press.un.org/en/2022/sgsm21228.doc.htm) a “moral and economic madness.”

Pakistan, which relies on yearly monsoons to enrich its agricultural industry, has had [unprecedented floods](https://www.nbcnews.com/science/environment/unthinkable-pakistans-record-rainfall-now-happen-century-rcna47902) since June, [impacting 30 million people](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/25/pakistan-floods-have-affected-over-30-million-people-minister) and killing [more than 1,500—a third of them children](https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1127051).

[Zulfiqar Kunbhar](https://twitter.com/zulfiqarkunbhar), a Karachi-based journalist with expertise in climate coverage, [explains](https://risingupwithsonali.com/how-climate-change-is-fueling-pakistans-devastating-floods/) that “things are very critical” in the rain-affected areas of his nation. Kunbhar has been visiting impacted regions and has seen firsthand the massive “agricultural loss and livelihood loss” among Pakistan’s farming communities.

Sindh, a low-lying province of Pakistan, is not only one of the most populous in the nation (Sindh is home to about 47 million people), but it also produces about a third of the agricultural produce, according to Kunbhar. Twenty years ago, Sindh was stricken with extreme [drought](https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/act-alert-pakistan-22002-five-sindh-districts-badly-affected-drought). In the summer of 2022, it was [drowning](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/06/we-screamed-our-hearts-out-for-help-homeless-escape-pakistan-floods) in chest-deep water.

The [UN](https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1127051) is warning that the water could take months to recede and that this poses serious health risks, as deadly diseases like cerebral malaria are emerging. Kunbhar summarizes that provinces like Sindh are facing both “the curse of nature” and government “mismanagement.”

Climate change plus government inaction on mitigation and resilience equals deadly consequences for the poor. This same equation plagues Puerto Rico, long relegated to the status of a United States territory. In September 2022, on the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Maria, which devastated Puerto Rico in 2017 and [killed nearly 3,000](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45338080) people, another storm named [Fiona knocked out power](https://www.axios.com/2022/09/23/puerto-rico-hurricane-fiona-bankruptcy-prepa-luma) for the entire region.

Julio López Varona, chief of campaigns at [Center for Popular Democracy Action](https://cpdaction.org/), [spoke to me](https://risingupwithsonali.com/puerto-rico-devastated-by-fiona-5-years-after-maria/) from Puerto Rico, saying, “the storm was extremely slow, going at like 8 or 9 miles an hour,” and as a result, “it pounded the island for more than three days” with relentless rain. “Communities were completely flooded; people have been displaced,” he says. Eventually, the electrical grid completely failed.

Days after the storm passed, millions of people remained without power—some even lost running water—leading the [White House to declare a major disaster](https://weather.com/news/news/2022-09-20-hurricane-fiona-puerto-rico-dominican-republic-turks) in Puerto Rico.

Even on the U.S. mainland, it is poor communities of color who have been hit the hardest by the impacts of climate change. Mississippi’s capital of Jackson, with an [82 percent Black population](https://www.npr.org/2021/10/21/1030272290/jackson-miss-lives-in-a-world-of-high-poverty-and-higher-expectations) and growing numbers of Latin American immigrants, struggles with adequate resources and has had problems with its water infrastructure for years.

Lorena Quiroz, founder of the [Immigrant Alliance for Justice and Equity](https://www.iajems.org/), a Jackson-based group doing multiracial grassroots organizing, [told me](https://risingupwithsonali.com/when-will-jackson-mississippis-residents-have-clean-water/) how the city’s residents have been struggling without clean running water since [major rains and resulting floods](https://www.npr.org/2022/08/31/1120223500/heavy-rain-and-flooding-leave-jackson-miss-residents-without-running-water) overwhelmed a water treatment plant this summer.

“It’s a matter of decades of disinvestment in this mostly Black, and now Brown, community,” says Quiroz. In a state run by white conservatives, Jackson is overseen by a Black progressive mayor, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, who is now [suing the state government over inaction](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/09/21/jackson-mississippi-water-lawsuit/) on the city’s water infrastructure.

Quiroz says it’s “painful to see how government is not doing what they should, how the state government is neglecting its most vulnerable populations.”

Over and over, the same pattern has emerged on a planet experiencing catastrophic climate change. Setting aside the fact that we are still [spewing greenhouse gases](https://unfccc.int/news/united-in-science-we-are-heading-in-the-wrong-direction) into the atmosphere as the world burns and floods, the impacts of a warming climate are disproportionately borne by poor communities of color as evidenced in Pakistan, Puerto Rico, Jackson, and elsewhere.

The UN head, Guterres is doing what he can in using his position to lay blame precisely on the culprits, [saying](https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-general-assembly-climate-change-cb3e386316a2fbd8ebab602f505b42f6) in his opening remarks to the UN General Assembly in New York recently, “It is high time to put fossil fuel producers, investors, and enablers on notice. Polluters must pay.” Guterres specifically touted the importance of taxing fossil fuel companies to cover the damage they are causing in places like Pakistan. According to the Associated Press, “Oil companies in July reported unprecedented profits of billions of dollars per month. ExxonMobil posted three months profits of $17.85 billion, Chevron of $11.62 billion, and Shell of $11.5 billion.”

Contrast this windfall with the countless numbers of people who lost their homes in Pakistan and are now living in shanties on roads where they have found some higher ground from the floods. “If you lose a crop, that’s seasonal damage, but if you lose a house, you have to pay for years to come,” says Kunbhar.

Kunbhar’s view of what is happening in Pakistan applies equally to Puerto Rico and Jackson: Society is “divided between the haves and have-nots,” he says. “The poorest of the poor who are already facing an economic crisis from generation to generation, they are the most vulnerable and the [worst] victims of this crisis.”

In Puerto Rico, Varona sees displaced communities losing their lands to wealthier communities. He says that the local government in Puerto Rico is “allowing millionaires and billionaires to come and pay no taxes and to actually take over many of the places that are safer for communities to be on.” This is an “almost intentional displacement of communities… that have historically lived here,” he says.

And in Jackson, Quiroz says she is aghast at the “mean-spiritedness” of Mississippi’s wealthier enclaves and state government. “It is so difficult to comprehend the way that our people are being treated.”

Although disparate and seemingly disconnected from one another, with many complicating factors, there are stark lines connecting climate victims to fossil fuel profits.

Pakistan’s poor communities are paying the price for ExxonMobil’s billions.

Puerto Rico remains in the dark so that Chevron may enjoy massive profits.

Jackson, Mississippi, has no clean drinking water so that Shell can enrich its shareholders.

When put in such terms, Guterres’s idea for taxing the perpetrators of climate devastation is a no-brainer. It’s “high time,” he [said](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/20/un-secretary-general-tax-fossil-fuel-companies-climate-crisis), “to put fossil fuel producers, investors and enablers on notice,” so that we can end our “suicidal war against nature.”