

Mismanaged flour distribution mechanisms and stampede-related deaths

An HRCP fact-finding report



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan



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Introduction

With record inflation and price hikes of essential items, further aggravated by damage to agricultural land from the 2022 floods, food insecurity has been widespread in Pakistan. On 7 March 2023, in order to provide relief to citizens, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif announced a relief package of free flour for eligible residents in Islamabad during Ramadan (23 March to 17 April), and invited the provincial governments to participate in the scheme with support from the federal government. The Punjab caretaker cabinet followed suit and announced a relief package as well, in which the Punjab government committed to providing 10 kg flour to families earning less than PKR 60,000 per month. This flour would be made available at specific grocery stores, trucking points, and utility stores.¹ On 20 March, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) government also announced the approval of allocation of funds for a similar free flour distribution scheme during Ramadan, with over 7,600 centres to be established for the purpose, out of which 6,000 would be set up by the food department and the district administrations while the remaining 1,600 by the Utility Stores Corporation.²

However, soon after the distribution began, stampedes and deaths were reported. On 20 March, 50-year-old Taaj Bibi lost her life in a stampede in Muzaffargarh during the distribution of free flour.³ Five women were seriously injured in Hasilpur, Bahawalpur during another stampede on 22 March at a flour distribution point.⁴ On 30 March, 12 people and two officers were injured in a stampede in the Madni Chowk distribution point in Multan.⁵ Many other stampedes have also been reported in distribution centres across Punjab, including Shujabad,⁶ Shakargah,⁷ and another one in Muzaffargarh.⁸ The KP flour distribution scheme has also not been without some unfortunate accidents: on 23 March, an elderly person lost his life when a stampede took place at a flour distribution point in Charsadda.⁹

After multiple such reports by the media, and complaints against the free flour distribution system in place, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) decided to conduct a fact-finding mission in April 2023 to investigate the deaths and injuries, and claims of any mismanagement, in different areas, namely Multan, Bahawalpur and Charsadda. For this purpose, three teams were organised. One team comprising of HRCP council member Nazir Ahmad, regional coordinator Faisal Tangwani, and HRCP members Khawaja Asad Ullah and Doctor Kousar investigated centres in Bahawalpur. The second team comprising of HRCP staff member Aneela Ashraf and HRCP member Flower Iqbal conducted the mission in Multan. The third team comprising of HRCP KP vice-chair Akbar Khan, regional coordinator Shahid Mehmood, staff member Isma Khan and HRCP member Sartaj Khan investigated the incident in Charsadda.

¹ Free flour and subsidised petrol for poor: PM Shehbaz okays ramadan relief package. (March 14, 2023). Geo News.

<https://www.geo.tv/latest/476197-free-flour-and-subsidised-petrol-for-poor-pm-shehbaz-okays-ramadan-relief-package>

² KP govt announces Rs19.77bn flour package for Ramazan. (March 21, 2023). Business Recorder.

<https://www.brecorder.com/news/40232556/kp-govt-announces-rs1977bn-flour-package-for-ramazan>

³ Woman dies in stampede at flour distribution point. (March 21, 2023). The Nation. <https://www.nation.com.pk/21-Mar-2023/woman-dies-in-stampede-at-flour-distribution-point>

⁴ Five women injured in 'stampede' at flour distribution point. (March 23, 2023). Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1743618>

⁵ 12 people, two cops injured in Multan free flour stampede. (March 30, 2023). The News International.

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1055465-12-people-two-cops-injured-in-multan-free-flour-stampede>

⁶ *Aata points par rush, dum ghatanay say 2 khabateen baybosh* [Crowd at distribution points leads to death of two women by suffocation]. (March 10, 2023). Dunya. https://e.dunya.com.pk/news/2023/March/2023-03-10/MUL/detail_img/x6642000_88506055.jpg.pagespeed.ic.LoSmIXUnxw.webp

⁷ *Shakargarh: Muft atta lainy ayya bazurg Shabri Dhakam Pail Mein Gurr Kr Jaban Bhaq* [Shakargarh: Elderly man dies in stampede at free flour distribution point]. (April 16, 2023). Jang. <https://e.jang.com.pk/multan/04-04-2023/page1>

⁸ Another old woman dies 'at free flour centre'. (April 17, 2023). Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1748052/another-old-woman-dies-at-free-flour-centre>

⁹ Flour distribution stampedes kill one, injure several in Charsadda, Kohat. (March, 24, 2023). Dawn.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1743790>



Mission's terms of reference

The mission's terms of reference were to:

- Assess the distribution mechanisms in place at free flour distribution centres.
- Investigate whether any mismanagement may have led to the various incidents of stampedes that occurred in different parts of South Punjab.
- Ascertain the facts behind the death of an elderly person at a stampede in Charsadda's free flour distribution point.
- Propose recommendations both for better distribution mechanisms and alternative solutions to provide economic relief to people.

Fact-finding exercise

Eligibility for relief

In both provinces, persons already registered with the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) were eligible to receive flour. Initially only those registered in BISP were eligible, but then the relief plan was made accessible for those not registered and with a monthly income up to PKR 60,000. Unregistered families were encouraged to register for BISP, either over the phone in Punjab or by visiting their nearest BISP office in KP. To check their eligibility, people were asked to send their computerised national identity card (CNIC) number in a text message to 8070 to receive confirmation, after which they could go to the flour distribution points. The KP government also integrated new features in its Marastyal smartphone app to facilitate eligible citizens in Ramadan.¹⁰

The Punjab Board of Informational Technology developed a special app for the distribution teams to verify the eligibility of the deserving persons at the distribution points.¹¹ After verification, the officials gave the deserving persons a token with which they could proceed to receive flour from the counters.

In KP, a tracking system was devised for the distribution teams: anyone wishing to receive free flour had to present their CNIC which the distribution team would then cross-check against BISP and National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) data to cross off their name and their family members name – this helped ensure that each household received the allotted free flour and not more than that. When the relief plan was announced, KP Chief Secretary Imdadullah Bosal had also said that district administrations should make separate arrangements for elderly people and women to at distribution points to receive their free flour easily.¹²

Multan

Visits to the distribution points

There were initially seven flour distribution points set up in Multan, of which four were functional according to the findings of the team: the centres at the Railway Ground, the Sports Complex, Madni Chowk and Waliyat Hussain College.

On 13 April, the team in Multan visited the flour distribution points at the Railway Ground and at Madni Chowk. They reached the Railway Ground distribution point first at around 9:30 AM, but found it closed without public notice. The team then visited the Sports Complex centre at 10 AM. However, the management at this distribution point reported that there had been a technical malfunction in the smartphone app due to which operations were halted for the day and recipients had been told to go back. A few women waited in the centre until 12 PM, after which they were made to leave the centre by the security guards forcefully.

The team visited two distribution points—the Sports Complex and Madni Chowk—the next day on 14 April. These centres were open, but again the distribution was stopped at 10 AM, this time due to shortage of flour. The

¹⁰ KP govt announces Rs19.77bn flour package for Ramazan. (March 21, 2023). Business Recorder.

<https://www.brecorder.com/news/40232556/kp-govt-announces-rs1977bn-flour-package-for-ramazan>

¹¹ Free flour and subsidised petrol for poor: PM Shehbaz okays Ramadan relief package. (March 14, 2023). Geo News.

<https://www.geo.tv/latest/476197-free-flour-and-subsidised-petrol-for-poor-pm-shehbaz-okays-ramadan-relief-package>

¹² KP govt announces Rs19.77bn flour package for Ramazan. (March 21, 2023). Business Recorder.

<https://www.brecorder.com/news/40232556/kp-govt-announces-rs1977bn-flour-package-for-ramazan>



team observed the conditions in the centres and interviewed the people who were there to receive flour, the people in charge of the distribution and the security guards.

Later, the team noted that announcements were made on loudspeakers at the Madni Chowk and the Sports Complex distribution points that the other two centres—Waliyat Hussain College and Railway Ground—were now permanently closed.

Distribution protocols

The people present to receive flour had multiple complaints about the centres being closed without due warning. They had come from far-off areas such as Pind Sandheela, Head Muhammad Wala, Basti Nau, Giray Wala, Sher Shah Muzaffrabad, Naag Shah, Basti Labar, Jhok Venice, Peeran Ghaib, Sadiqabad and Mitti Tal. They complained that they would arrive after paying fares only to find the distribution points closed without any prior public notice.

Otherwise, the team found the distribution mechanisms in place at the remaining open distribution points to be well-organised, observing that both Multan centres had one counter specifically for women, one for men, and one for elderly persons and disabled citizens. At every centre, there was a complaints cell, a free dispensary, and a governmental rescue team available at all times in case of medical emergencies.

The team also observed that there were tents over the seating arrangements. However, since the tents had no walls, the seats were directly positioned in the sunlight. This, combined with the lack of fans and warm weather, made it impossible for citizens to sit on the seats, and they preferred to sit on the floor away from the sunlight.

Malfunctioning app

The men and women waiting to receive the flour at the distribution points also complained that the app the distribution teams used often malfunctioned which would halt the distribution of flour for the day. According to Muhammad Riaz, who was interviewed at the Sports Complex centre on 13 April: “I have been here since six in the morning, and I have the token, but they are not letting me through because they say there is some problem with the app.”

The person in charge of distribution at this centre did not seem perturbed. “There is a technical fault in the app; it has not been working since morning,” he admitted. “Sometimes minor issues with the app occur, but no serious issues. There are also internet issues, but these will be fixed soon.”

Some people waiting at the centre claimed that almost 50 percent of the people who visited were sent home empty-handed every day.

Administration’s treatment of beneficiaries

The mission observed that the administration talked to the beneficiaries in a harsh tone. People also claimed that the distribution teams did not distribute the flour when they had it, and closed points arbitrarily. According to Ilahi Baksh who was waiting at the Sports Complex centre: “We have been standing here all morning while fasting. The trolleys are full of flour, but they are not distributing it.” A woman, Shahwar Arzoo, stated: “My mother is diabetic. I am pregnant. I have been coming here for the past three days. They are not distributing the flour, even though we can see they have flour in the trolleys.”

Alarmingly, there were multiple complaints about the attitude of the administration. People waiting for flour even reported instances of violence and baton charge during stampedes due to which people lost their lives. According to Tufail who had travelled from Muzaffarabad to receive flour: “The employees inside have beat me. The person in charge of the tokens gave tokens to the first twenty ID cards and then left his chair. The policeman also slapped me.”

Quality of the flour

The people waiting at the distribution points complained about the quality of the flour, claiming that it was substandard despite the chief minister’s promise that no compromises would be made in that regard.¹³ After a close examination of the flour at the Sports Complex centre, the fact-finding team found it to be made of husk and dried up *roti*.

¹³ PM Shehbaz vows to provide free flour to 15.8m Punjab households. (March 14, 2023). *Dunya News*. <https://dunyanews.tv/en/Pakistan/706729-PM-Shehbaz-vows-to-provide-free-flour-to-15.8m-Punjab-households>



Allegations of corruption

Multiple people claimed that the officials at the distribution points were taking bribes or distributing flour to their own connections on fake tokens. Muhammad Sohail, who was standing in line at the Sports Complex, said, “They give their own people four bags and here we stand empty-handed”. Tasleem Bibi corroborated this: “I have been coming for the past ten days, and I am returning empty-handed yet again.” Another woman, Parveen, who was from Lutf Abad, stated: “I have been here since 6 AM, and now they are telling me to go back since the flour has finished.” This was concerning because it was only 10 AM at the time, and distribution was supposed to continue until 5 PM officially.

A woman named Nasreen hinted at corruption and malpractice by stating: “They are telling me that my share of flour has already been collected. How can it be when I have not collected it?” Another woman, Rehana Mai, who had come from Suraj Miani, stated: “My children have no father, and I have come to collect flour. They told me that my share of flour has been collected. Can anyone tell me who took my children’s flour? If I ask them, they push me.”

Some people claimed that they would be given tokens but told to come the next day, only to be informed by the administration that their ration had already been distributed. Every eligible person was to receive three bags of flour, but some women reported that they were only given one bag and told that the rest had been distributed, even when they had not collected it.

It was also reported in the news that some officials from the revenue department were facing inquiries on charges of involvement in distribution of fake tokens for free flour bags while more than 30,000 bags reportedly went missing. However, Deputy Commissioner Salman Khan Lodhi, while admitting that certain revenue officials had been suspended for distributing fake tokens, reportedly denied any allegations of missing flour bags.¹⁴

Bahawalpur

Visits to the distribution points

The team in Bahawalpur visited the distribution points in Dring Stadium and Model Bazaar. They found the situation in Bahawalpur’s distribution points to be relatively better than at Multan’s. Both centres in Bahawalpur had separate counters for women, disabled citizens and senior citizens. A complaints cell, a tent with seats for people who had come to collect the flour, a free dispensary and government rescue teams for immediate medical aid were all available at the centres.

People at the distribution points complained that they had to stand in line as early as 6 AM, and even then, there was no guarantee that they would receive flour due to flour shortages or technical issues with the distribution team’s app. When the team talked to the administrator in charge of the Dring Stadium distribution point, he denied any issues with the app at first. However, he then admitted to some instances where the app had malfunctioned and people had to be sent back empty-handed. He claimed that the authorities were trying to do their best to provide free flour, and that the commissioner had also visited the distribution points regularly¹⁵ to personally oversee operations,¹⁶ especially after stampedes had led to injuries and deaths.¹⁷ The prime minister had also visited the Dring Stadium distribution point on 26 March to review distribution protocols.¹⁸

Quality of flour

There were no complaints about the quality of the flour being distributed. When the mission analysed the flour themselves, they came to the conclusion that it was good-quality flour.

¹⁴ Another old woman dies ‘at free flour centre’. (April 17, 2023). Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1748052/another-old-woman-dies-at-free-flour-centre>

¹⁵ I. Joiya. (March 24, 2023). Bahawalpur commissioner monitors free flour distribution. Daily Times. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/1076577/bahawalpur-commissioner-monitors-free-flour-distribution/>

¹⁶ More than 1.6m free flour bags distributed in Bahawalpur district. (April 15, 2023). The Nation. <https://www.nation.com.pk/15-Apr-2023/more-than-1-6m-free-flour-bags-distributed-in-bahawalpur-district>

¹⁷ Two more die, 56 injured in stampedes at free flour centres in Punjab. (March 29, 2023). Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1744694>

¹⁸ PM Shehbaz visits Bahawalpur, orders speedy provision of free flour to elderly, sick people. (March 26, 2023). Dunya News. <https://dunya.com.pk/en/Pakistan/710216-PM-Shehbaz-visits-Bahawalpur,-orders-speedy-provision-of-free-flour-to-elderly,-sick-people>



Meeting with the Bahawalpur commissioner

The team at Bahawalpur met with Commissioner Dr Ehtesham Anwar. The commissioner told the team that they had so far distributed 4,359,825 bags of flour at the distribution points. He said that he had been monitoring all the procedures himself, and admitted that there had been instances of mismanagement in the initial phases of the distribution process. In fact, a woman had lost her life during a stampede at Ahmadpur Sharqia.

Dr Ehtesham also said that the administration had been working tirelessly, distributing the flour without any religious discrimination. The team informed the commissioner that HRCP's Multan office had received reports from local human rights defenders of Hindu women facing difficulties at distribution points in Yazman. However, the commissioner said that he was unaware of any such complaints, and said that the distribution process would be completed by the end of Ramadan anyway. The commissioner said that only eligible people were receiving flour, and that there was no political intervention or bribery in this regard. He refuted claims of corruption, and said that all the bags of flour were accounted for.

Charsadda: A case study

Details of the incident

On 23 March, a stampede had occurred at a free flour distribution point at Charsadda's main bazaar. According to the local administration and eye witnesses, thousands of people had gathered outside the gate of the vacant animal husbandry hospital, the designated distribution point, waiting for distribution to start. When the gate was finally opened, a stampede took place in which Sher Afzal, a 70-years-old farmer from the Kuladher village in Charsadda, was reportedly killed, and at least four others sustained injuries, including a woman. After the stampede, the flour was sent back from the distribution point to prevent any further deaths or injuries.

Meeting with Sher Afzal's family

On 13 April, the team met with Mir Alam, thirty-year-old son of the deceased Sher Afzal. According to him, thousands of people had gathered at the distribution point for the free flour. The place was overcrowded since it was located in the city centre and was one of the hundreds of distribution points set up by the government in Charsadda during Ramadan.

Mir Alam recounted that at around 10 AM on 23 March, his father Sher Afzal went to the distribution point and stood at the entrance near the hospital gate. Mir Alam said that as soon as the gate opened, the crowd that had gathered suddenly rushed forward, causing a stampede which pushed his father to the ground. Given Sher Afzal's advanced years and weak physical health, he succumbed to multiple injuries as people ran over him. He was quickly taken to the Charsadda District Headquarter Hospital (DHQ), but then declared dead before arriving at the hospital. While the police stationed at this hospital filed the *roznamcha* (daily diary report), the family refused to lodge an FIR when prompted to do so as they considered it an accidental death. Afterwards, the assistant commissioner paid them a visit for condolences, and on the third day after the incident, the Al-Khidmat Foundation delivered free rations to their house.

Mir Alam said that they were a family of eight, all dependent on his father who used to work at the fields of landlords. He also claimed that they had not received any help from the government.

Testimony from local journalist Suleman Shah

On the same day, the team talked to freelance journalist Suleman Shah who claimed that the government had no proper plan in place for the distribution of flour, nor were people provided any information about the distribution protocols. He said that only two security guards were placed near the main gate of the distribution site, and they were insufficient to manage the crowd. He added that neither the deputy commissioner nor any senior official had visited the family to express their condolences, nor was an inquiry into the incident ordered.

Testimony from DHQ muharar Muhammad Ali

According to the *muharrar's* (diarist) report, Sher Afzal had already succumbed to his injuries when he was admitted into the hospital. Muhammad Ali, the *muharrar*, had filed the *roznamcha* and asked the family if they wanted to lodge an FIR, but they had declined. He had then asked them to provide a written statement that they did not want to lodge an FIR, which they provided to him with thumb impressions affixed.



Meeting with DHQ Deputy Medical Superintendent Dr Muhammad Essa

Dr Muhammad Essa, the deputy medical superintendent at the Charsadda DHQ, had stated in his report that Sher Afzal was already dead when he was admitted into the hospital. The report further states that Sher Afzal's face had multiple bruises. Dr Essa said that the family of the deceased had been asked if they wanted a post mortem but they declined. Therefore, Dr Essa had submitted the medical report to the district administration.

Meeting with Additional Deputy Commissioner Mr Hamza Zahoor

The team met with the Charsadda district's Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC) Mr Hamza Zahoor later in the day. Mr Zahoor stated that this particular site was reserved for elderly men and women only. However, since this site was located in the city centre, a large crowd had gathered. Mr Zahoor said that public announcements were made that the flour would be provided to everyone who qualifies in accordance with the tracking system by which no two members of the same family could take flour bags.

He further said that they had not expected such a large crowd to gather. As per the deputy commissioner's instructions, two security guards had been allotted at each distribution point to manage the crowd, but he admitted that such inadequate arrangements, as well as the district administration's mismanagement, in catering to such a large crowd exacerbated the situation.

He claimed that the best possible arrangements in the province had been made as they had increased the number of distribution points from 360 to 458 in the district and had already achieved 80 percent of the targeted flour delivery to 317,000 families; till now, they had given flour to over 250,000 families. He further stated that they distributed flour as per their tracking system, and that the incident had taken place due to the people's 'illiteracy' and desperation, worsened by the slow pace of distribution – while the distribution of free flour had started in the morning, they had severely underestimated the crowd size. That, coupled with cumbersome distribution arrangements (cross-checking against the tracking system) slowed down the pace of the distribution.

Conclusion and observations

The Bahawalpur and Multan fact-finding mission teams observed that distribution centres had proper arrangements for the distribution process, including separate counters for women, disabled citizens and senior citizens. Complaints cells, free dispensaries and government rescue teams for immediate medical aid were also readily available which is commendable.

However, there were glaring inconsistencies in the management of the distribution otherwise. While the Bahawalpur centres had adequate seating arrangements for flour beneficiaries and good-quality flour, the Multan centres had poor seating areas that were unprotected from the heat and sub-standard quality flour. The government had no check and balance mechanisms in place to monitor the standard of flour. Moreover, it was observed that some centres were closed before their closing times, and some closed seemingly arbitrarily without due public notice. The Punjab government's app for flour distribution would frequently malfunction which, coupled with flour shortages, would lead to people being sent back without receiving any flour. The distribution process was also marred by the staff's alleged dismissiveness to people enduring long wait-times and harsh tactics in managing crowds, with people complaining about violent beatings. This, coupled with allegations of corruption and hoarding of flour, leaves much to be desired.

In KP, the fact-finding mission team observed that the Charsadda district management's communication regarding the distribution protocols was not clear. The community was not properly informed about the protocols in place before Ramadan, such as the fact that certain distribution points were designated sites for elderly men and women only. The district administration had thus grossly underestimated the size of the crowd that appeared on 23 March and were underprepared to manage it effectively other than the provision of two security guards.

The fact-finding mission teams concluded that the arrangements for flour distribution were severely lacking in the initial phase, tragically resulting in stampedes and deaths which were preventable. While the government had data ready in the form of BISP beneficiaries, the crowds were mismanaged, and there were allegations of flour hoarding, poor quality of flour being distributed and corruption. HRCP feels, and recommends below, that transfer of cash grants to eligible people would have been a much better option, that could have saved additional resources and lives.



Recommendations

If such a distribution scheme is initiated again in the future, then the following recommendations may be considered for more effective dispersal, particularly to avoid such dangerous incidents as stampedes:

1. Since the government has relied successfully on BISP and NADRA's data for this scheme, it is strongly recommended that, in the future, it must consider adding on to the existing cash grants to eligible people instead of conducting in-person distribution of flour, considering issues like neglectful crowd management leading to potential loss of lives in stampedes and complaints of inconsistent quality of flour.
2. The procedure to check eligibility for such relief schemes should be communicated better, with SOPs put in place in case smartphone applications or tracking software for distribution malfunction.
3. Such schemes should be implemented at the level of union councils in order to ensure better distribution to people at the local level.
4. If grants in cash or kind are to be distributed in-person, the government must run a public awareness campaign of locations of distribution points so that people do not flock to the same distribution point. Distribution points should also be set up in more accessible locations for people from far-flung areas to avoid overcrowding. Furthermore, distribution teams must be trained in catering to people in need with more empathy rather than treating them harshly or dismissively. Better crowd management tactics that use non-violent means must be implemented, with provision of enough security personnel at each distribution site.

Appendix 1: Photographs taken of interviewees at distribution points in Bahawalpur and Multan



Appendix 2: Photographs of the floor and seating arrangements at the Multan distribution points



Appendix 3: Photographs taken related to the mission's investigation of the stampede in Charsadda



The Charsadda main bazaar distribution point



Gate behind the stall where the stampede occurred



Meeting with the family of the deceased



Meeting with the Charsadda Additional Deputy Commissioner