

## [Pakistan's 'Billion Tree Tsunami' gains momentum](#)

[Rina Saeed Khan](#) — Updated May 17, 2016 06:17pm

The torrential rains and landslides during April in northern Pakistan's resulted in the deaths of more than 140 people and left widespread destruction. It is the second spell of heavy rain this spring in the area and experts say that heavy deforestation and rapid erosion of mountainsides exacerbated the damage.

According to Leading Environmentalist Malik Amin Aslam, "While climate change is causing the enhanced intensity of rainfall, deforestation is unfortunately abetting the mass scale damage."

Malik Amin is also advisor to the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party in north-western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, and the architect and chairman of the party's "Green Growth Initiative". Under this initiative, the party has begun a number of activities to reverse the past sixty years of deforestation.

"Along with a crackdown on the timber mafias, we have started the large scale afforestation project called "The Billion Tree Tsunami" to reverse this trend and save future generations," he told [thethirdpole.net](#).

Northern Pakistan is part of the Himalayan-Hindu Kush-Karakorum region and yet the country has one of the lowest forest covers in the region (less than 3pc compared to India's 20pc and Bhutan's 70pc).

The KP government has promised \$150 million to the forest restoration effort. "The KP government has committed to not only reversing the high rate of deforestation, but also shifting the current philosophy of treating forests as 'revenue' machines towards preserving them as valued 'natural capital,'" explained Malik Amin.

The project kicked off in June 2015 and so far 250 million saplings have been raised in largely private nurseries across KP. These saplings are now being planted across the province. Much of the hard work has already been done according to Malik Amin.

"As this massive nurseries infrastructure is in place, it would be much easier to replicate this next year and take this number to 300 million saplings. The remaining 450 million saplings are being naturally generated in forest enclosures, which are being protected through the participation of local communities. All this will hopefully allow KP to achieve its target of one billion plantations by the end of next year".

This is a big jump from previous years when only about 20 million saplings used to be planted every year.

We recently visited Haripur district in KP to see how this ambitious project was progressing on the ground. Raees Khan, the district forest officer for Haripur, showed us around the "central model" government nursery in Nikkahpah near the main road.

The nursery, which has grown around 600,000 plants since it was set up last year, was full of Chir pine saplings that would soon be ready for plantation. The nursery also had Kachnar saplings (a local variety) and Eucalyptus, which are thirsty trees that could dry out the sub-soil water. Eucalyptus are being grown on popular demand of local communities as the fast growing species can bring economic returns within five years, explained Raees Khan.

The Billion Tree Project's government nursery in Haripur -Image by Asim Ali

Some ecologists have warned that the campaign will be a futile because the wrong species of trees are being identified for the wrong places.

Lal Badshah, an ecologist and assistant professor at Botany department in University of Peshawar, is one such critic. He told News Lens Pakistan that conocarpus—a tropical mangrove species found along rivers in limited coastal areas—are being planted in the mountainous Peshawar region.

Malik Amin rejects such criticisms, “A high preference is given to indigenous varieties for the local areas. In the south, where there is marginal and water logged lands, the Eucalyptus plantations aid in lowering the water table,” he said.

These nurseries have now sprung up in almost every district of KP, from Chitral in the mountainous north to Dera Ismail Khan in the southern plains. Most are privately owned and the demand is increasing.

Under the ‘youth nurseries’ package, the provincial government provides a secure buyback agreement for unemployed youth or rural women to set up kitchen nurseries – with about 25,000 saplings – as well as a 25pc of costs in advance. The nursery can then earn around Rs12000 to 15000 per month, which is a sizeable income in the area. In fact, most of the small scale or household nurseries are currently being run by rural women who have managed to enhance their income.

### **Local grumbles**

We later met with the local community in the nearby picturesque village of Karwala in Haripur district. The mountains where newly planted saplings could be seen from the roadside, but the villagers were unhappy. They had only been paid after a delay of several months, which had caused considerable consternation.

“We missed the spring plantation season as we were not paid in time,” said one disgruntled villager. They also wanted fruit and flower trees instead of Chir pine saplings as this could provide them with some income in this underdeveloped.

In another area of Haripur where a “model plantation” had been established, people were critical about the kind of trees that were being planted.

“They need to see which area needs what kinds of plantation that would be beneficial to the local community—for example they should be promoting olive trees here in this plantation,” said Maqbool Malik from the village of Mang.

The project is clearly not perfect, but as the villagers were told, ultimately the trees planted in this remote mountainous area would prevent soil erosion and land sliding and was for the benefit of their future generations.

The entire project is also being monitored by the forest department, the KP government and WWF. WWF published a report after its one of its audits, although the report itself is not yet publicly available, thethirdpole.net was shown its executive summary.

The report stated that, “In the light of the findings it is concluded that an excellent effort has been made in achieving the ambitious targets of the BTTAP project.” But it also noted that, “In general it was noticed that the social mobilization process had been given least importance, which needs to be put on the forefront.”

Dr Ejaz Ahmed, senior director at WWF-Pakistan, added, “At this stage of the monitoring, the success ratio (for the tree saplings) was encouraging and we feel that this project is going to contribute positively in the forest cover improvement.”

### **International recognition**

At the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris, the project was recognised by the Bonn Challenge, which is a global partnership aiming to restore 150 million hectares of the world’s deforested and degraded lands by 2020. At the Paris conference, the KP government pledged to restore 384,000 hectares of degraded land (by reforestation) under its ‘Billion Tree Tsunami’ project.

Plantation has taken place on the barren slopes of Karwala village in Haripur. -Image by Asim Ali

Imran Khan recently also inaugurated the One Tree, One Life initiative, under which children are being motivated to plant a tree and become a part of the “Billion Tree Tsunami”.

During the launch day on the International Day of Forests on 21 March, over 10,000 school children planted more than 100,000 trees in Peshawar alone.

According to Imran Khan, the chairman of the PTI, “The project is aimed at not only planting a billion trees by 2018 but also shifting mindsets in the province and in Pakistan from environmental destruction towards valuing, conserving and preserving our precious natural resources.”

### **Winning over the opposition**

Pakistan's federal government, led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's PML(N) party which had attacked the 'Billion Tree Tsunami' when it was first launched, has now approved its own "Green Pakistan Programme".

The aim of the programme is to plant 100 million trees all over the country in the next five years and will be led by the Prime Minister himself.

In December 2015, the chief spokesperson for the federal PML(N) government, Pervez Rashid, while addressing a press conference in Lahore, questioned the feasibility of the project. "When did this gigantic task take place?" he demanded.

The PTI's response at the time was to invite the minister to the plantations to see for himself.

"It is heartening to see that the federal government has gone from criticising to emulating this forestry initiative," said Imran Khan. "I hope that they will implement what they are advertising and become partners in saving our country's environmental future and combating climate change."

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