

Tragedy in South Asia: The Earthquake and the U.S. Response

By Shehzad Nadeem | October 19, 2005

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While the destruction wrought by the quake was most pronounced in north-east Pakistan, including Pakistan-administered Kashmir, more than 1,400 people also died in Indian Kashmir. Stranded villagers have begun speaking about a “second earthquake”—the failure of the relief to get through in time.

Given the immensity of the disaster the world community has responded with an outpouring of aid. Pakistan has thus far received \$350 million in aid pledges and the United Nations has launched an emergency appeal for \$272 million to help victims.

In contrast to the U.S., which rejected Cuba's aid offer after Hurricane Katrina, the Pakistani government has openly accepted assistance from nuclear rival India and the cooperation between the two countries is said to be unprecedented. While India turned down foreign aid for both the Asian tsunami and the earthquake claiming that it has adequate resources to assist victims.

In keeping with its slow and lackluster response to the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. government initially offered a paltry \$100,000 in aid to earthquake victims in Pakistan—the same amount of aid Afghanistan sent to the U.S. after Katrina. But since then, U.S. aid for rescue and reconstruction has been ratcheted up to \$50 million. With this increase, the U.S. is behind only Kuwait and the UAE, who have pledged \$100 million each.

In addition to the financial support, eight U.S. military helicopters were diverted from operations in Afghanistan to deliver aid and evacuate the wounded. But helicopters are often the only means of search and rescue and they remain in desperately short supply. As writer Tariq Ali argues, “A few miles to the north of the disaster zone there is a large fleet of helicopters belonging to the western armies occupying parts of Afghanistan... Three days after the earthquake, the U.S. released eight helicopters from “war duty” to help transport food and water to isolated villages. Too little, too late.”

Despite the lack of a stronger response from the U.S., some commentators tried to find a silver lining to the disaster and argued, at least implicitly, that some good might have resulted from the calamity. The Wall Street Journal ran a telling piece on how the earthquake's devastation posed a major setback to Islamist groups in the region, killing scores of their number, which, however, constitutes only a small portion of the wounded, displaced, and deceased. In its callous disregard for the human toll exacted by the quake, the Washington Times opined: “The highly visible U.S. role in Pakistan's earthquake-relief efforts could improve popular attitudes toward America in the region, just as U.S. aid after the tsunami produced a sharp pro-U.S. swing in Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries.”

These sentiments are of a piece with the wholesale reorientation of domestic security policy from disaster preparedness to terrorism prevention following the tragedy of 9/11—the effects of which were on vivid display in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. While it is true that enlightened self-interest may have inspired the Bush administration to increase its aid offering to Pakistan, what is needed now more



than ever is a recasting of global security in human terms; a recognition that the human implications of such tragedies impinge directly upon the political consequences and cannot be neatly separated.

A key ally in the struggle against al-Qaeda, the Bush administration has lent critical diplomatic, military, and financial support to the Pakistani government of Pervez Musharraf. But for those who see in the military-led government a last bulwark against religious extremism and civil strife, the regime's lack of capacity was tragically exposed in the deficiency of emergency resources that left many victims without food, medicine, and shelter for days. As the death toll continues to mount, so too does public anger toward the Pakistani Army. Reports from Pakistan indicate that Islamist organizations, by providing relief quickly and efficiently, are taking advantage of the vacuum created by continued government delays.

As with most international aid, the U.S. has provided Pakistan with too much military aid and too little economic and social assistance. Instead the U.S. should seek to strengthen Pakistan's social infrastructure and its political and civilian institutions to improve disaster preparedness as well as to diminish

the appeal of those who choose to exploit such tragedies for political ends.

Additionally, the U.S. can play an important role for building long term stability in the region by actively encouraging the ongoing yet fragile peace process between India and Pakistan. A primary reason the two countries were able to cooperate so readily after the earthquake has a good deal to do with the fact that peace efforts were underway beforehand.

Finally, the earthquake reinforces the pressing need to muster political and financial support for a UN-administered global disaster relief fund from which money can be drawn immediately after a disaster strikes, as suggested by Hansjoerg Strohmeyer, Chief of the UN Office of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs.

While Asia recovers from the tsunami, New Orleans is being pumped dry, and Pakistan mourns and rebuilds, we owe it to the victims of these tragedies to learn from past mistakes.

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