

Kashmir winter: Relief is us

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This year's natural disasters—a tsunami in South Asia, a series of brutal hurricanes in the Gulf and a massive earthquake in Kashmir—are enough to make Left Behind enthusiasts see portents of the end times. The earthquake in Kashmir is perhaps the most devastating of all. It has already killed 80,000 people. Many victims, trapped in the largely inaccessible Himalayan highlands, are facing a brutal winter without food, shelter and medical care. The United Nations has increased its goal of aid to be supplied by industrialized nations from \$312 million to \$550 million.

The world has been slow to respond to the earthquake victims, according to the British organization Oxfam. Oxfam reported that less than 30 percent has been committed to the original request for \$312 million. Although the U.S. sent much-needed helicopters into the rugged terrain, observers claim that the response has been nothing like it was after the tsunami, when the U.S. was clearly leading relief efforts.

No doubt the U.S., like the rest of the world, is weary from responding to disasters. But if ever there was an opportunity for changing the image of the U.S. in the Muslim world, this is it. American relief work in Indonesia after the tsunami had the effect of improving the U.S. image in that largely Muslim country.

Indeed, the prospect of Americans getting credit for helping Pakistanis worries radical Muslims. Some jihadists have claimed that the U.S.'s intentions are military rather than humanitarian—that the disaster is being used as an occasion for building a military presence in the region. It does not help the situation that much of the pre-earthquake aid to Pakistan was for military assistance.

Experts in conflict resolution speak about “transformative actions”—actions that break deadlocks between hostile parties. Usually they involve doing something that one's opponent least expects: an act of charity or an effort at reconciliation. Jesus suggested transformative actions when he told his disciples that when someone asks for your coat, you should give your cloak as well, and when someone forces you to go one mile, you should also go the second. A massive relief effort in Pakistan

could be such a transformative action on a global scale.

The Bush administration has acknowledged that the war on terrorism can be won in the long term only by winning over the hearts and minds of the Muslim people. This relief challenge is a test of that conviction.

Of course, Christians are called to feed the hungry, clothe the sick and provide shelter for the homeless simply because this is what Jesus commands, not because it entails personal or political gain or because it will make people who don't like us change their minds. And acts of benevolence can lead to our own transformation.