

Agony in Pakistan: After the quake

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As many as 25,000 of the 35,000 people who lived in the city of Balakot died in the earthquake that hit northern Pakistan and India-controlled Kashmir in October. Bibi Rahiba lost her husband, one brother, and three of her five children. Weeks after the quake, she has made little progress in finding the bodies of her children. But she steadily chips away at the rubble. At night she sleeps in a tent perched over the ruins of what were once two- and three-story homes. As snow starts to fall and the Himalayan winter descends, the town is a cemetery. Rahiba says she won't sleep well until she has reburied her children in one of the fresh graveyards that punctuate the torn landscape.

The soft thumping of helicopter rotors echoes through the valleys, a constant backdrop to the monotonous task of digging for survivors and the more hopeful labor of erecting winterized tents. The myriad accents of relief workers heard amidst the rubble demonstrate the global character of the relief effort. But it won't be enough. Many more will die in the coming weeks.

A disaster is a combination of a natural hazard, like the shaking of the ground, and human vulnerability, like the thousands of schools that collapsed, entombing tens of thousands of children. The poorly constructed schools—usually built only after corrupt officials pocketed a third or more of the construction funds—are a dramatic indicator of how nature can't take all the blame for the region's suffering.

"Many of the schools that collapsed were built with World Bank money, and there was bad management, lack of foresight and probably corruption in the construction of these schools. They often weren't constructed with the best materials available. It's a nightmare that will take us many years to get over. For now we are a country full of people with broken limbs and lots of orphans. Agony and grief have taken over the country," said Bishop Samuel Azariah of the Raiwind Diocese of the Church of Pakistan.

A major player in the relief effort has been Pakistan's army. There was no other organization that had the personnel and the equipment, especially the helicopters,

at the ready. The army was a little slow on the uptake, apparently reluctant to leave the contested border with India that justifies its huge share of national resources, but once the troops showed up they made a world of difference.

The extraordinary mission also allowed another facet of the soldiers' personalities to show through. "Being here has toned them down, they don't look like normal army guys. In the quake area, the soldiers look like you and me, playing with the children, and they seem to enjoy that role. This disaster gives them an opportunity to get closer to the people," said Dennis Joseph, the associate director for operations of Church World Service in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

That worries many here, who think the military is using the emergency to expand its political hegemony at the cost of civil society and its legion of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

"Although on the face of it they're cooperating, the army sees NGOs as competitors because they're the immediate recipient of international money. It's a matter of control over resources. It is not a cordial or cooperative and friendly relationship. It's a tense, love-hate relationship," said a Pakistani relief worker who asked not to be named.

The head of the army, General Pervez Musharraf, who is also the country's president, seems to have gained political strength from the disaster, which brought a rare moment of national unity. Opposition parties, which had planned a nationwide mobilization against Musharraf for the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, called off the protest so as not to appear uncharitable during a time of great suffering. Although they mounted their own relief caravans and clinics, the opposition groups seem for now to have lost their footing on the still shaky political terrain the earthquake left behind.

Musharraf postponed a \$10 billion order for 77 F-16s. The Bush administration had pushed the sale of fighter jets to both Pakistan and its nuclear neighbor India. The announcement by Musharraf gave him more credibility when he complained about the lack of international support for earthquake relief work compared to that given after last year's tsunami, which he said generated a generous response because foreigners were among its victims. Many aid workers in Pakistan's north are veterans of last year's tsunami relief efforts, and they agreed with Musharraf's comparison.

“In places like Sri Lanka, after the tsunami you had a few hundred meters that were devastated next to areas that were relatively untouched, while after the quake in Pakistan you have valley after valley of destruction, which has limited the ability of people to help each other as much,” said Kevin Hartigan, the regional director for South Asia of Catholic Relief Services.

Pakistan’s troubled religious situation didn’t deter relief efforts by the country’s minority Christian community. Two dioceses of the Church of Pakistan set up a clinic in a tent village outside Balakot, and Christians throughout the country donated money, blankets, tents and medicines to the quake victims, almost all of whom are Muslims.

According to Bishop Azariah, the involvement of foreign and domestic church groups in the emergency response has created a bit of cognitive dissonance for some Muslims in a very conservative area where fundamentalist preaching and the U.S. war in Iraq have made the West and Christianity synonymous with evil.

“Those who reached the earthquake scene first were primarily people from Europe and the United States. Before anyone from Pakistan could reach the area they were already there, with money and food and supplies. One fellow in the earthquake area said, ‘The people we call infidels are the first ones who came to save us. So what are we talking about?’ These are hopeful signs,” the bishop said.

If the response to the quake has helped bridge some religious and political gaps in the short term, that progress will quickly erode in the absence of a long-term commitment. Many of the quake victims are Pashtuns, and they know well how the U.S. championed them in Afghanistan as long as the Soviets were a common enemy. With the Soviet pullout, they fell quickly from fashion and into the welcoming arms of the Taliban.

To avoid further alienating people in a region abused by U.S. policy, Washington needs to generously support long-term relief and reconstruction while pushing to lower the army’s profile and support authentic democratization in Pakistan. The first will take only money. The second will demand an ability to overcome the myopia of the war on terror and support real efforts at peace as defined by Asians rather than oil warriors and arms merchants in Washington.

“The work of rehabilitation and resettling people will be the most tedious, difficult and costly part of responding to the earthquake,” Azariah said. “But by then the

world will have forgotten our situation. It will no longer be on the TV screens of the world. Yet that's precisely when we'll need more money and professional help. We're preparing to do what we can, but we're also going to need our sisters and brothers to help us."