

Hearts on The Line in Pakistan

WASHINGTON POST, Friday, June 12, 2009

By Ahmed Rashid

MARDAN, Pakistan -- Even before the [explosion](#) Tuesday at the Pearl Continental Hotel killed at least 16 people in Peshawar, Pakistan was at the center of global attention. Yet for all the concern about terrorism, the world has been stunningly indifferent to the plight of the more than 2.4 million people who have fled the Swat Valley, where the Pakistani army is for the first time seriously attacking the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

If the internally displaced Pakistanis are not properly cared for, public opinion, which has shifted dramatically in recent weeks to support the offensive against the Taliban, could once again turn in support of compromise. Last week, the Taliban launched a series of devastating suicide attacks to both divert security forces and cower public opinion. The truck bomb Tuesday night in Peshawar, northwestern Pakistan's provincial capital, reportedly injured 70.

The mass exodus from the battle zone to the southern plains has been the largest and fastest displacement of people since the genocide in Rwanda 15 years ago, U.N. officials say. Most of the displaced fled the Swat Valley in just two to three weeks last month.

While the government response has been mixed, ordinary Pakistanis have reacted en masse, loading up trucks in Karachi and Lahore with wheat, sugar, electric fans and bedding and sending them north to towns such as Mardan in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), the center of the crisis. Yet their efforts seem meager next to the enormity of the humanitarian disaster.

President Obama seems to be the only world leader concerned about the displaced civilians. The United States allocated \$110 million and then an additional \$200 million after Obama's special envoy Richard Holbrooke assessed the situation last week.

Holbrooke castigated Europe for its lack of support and then sought to raise funds in the Arab world, which has not responded to the Pakistanis' plight. Islamabad says that no European or Muslim Arab country has sent any major aid.

U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has warned that the United Nations may be forced to cut all its services, including food supplies, by July if its appeal for \$543 million in emergency aid goes unmet. After nearly a month, donor countries have pledged only 20 percent of that. The International Committee of the Red Cross -- the only aid agency working with civilians wounded from the fighting and with those civilians who have remained in the destroyed towns of Swat -- seeks \$38 million, which would double its Pakistan budget for this year.

Strategically, much is at stake. The fighting in Swat is not just against extremism but for the hearts and minds of future generations. "Pakistani public support for the campaign against the Taliban and help to the [internally displaced] could dissipate fast if international aid is not forthcoming," a senior U.N. official told me. "Moreover, dissatisfied [displaced civilians] could become targets for recruitment by the Taliban and al-Qaeda."

Already, police here have caught more than 50 Taliban adherents among the displaced, either hiding or trying to coerce youngsters into becoming suicide bombers. Worryingly, among the many secular Pakistani charities working here are extremist organizations such as Falah-i-Insaniat, as the Lashkar-i-Taiba militant group that carried out the massacre in Mumbai last year is now known. Falah-i-Insaniat also supports the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Such groups -- which are heavily funded by extremist sympathizers abroad -- are not likely to run out of money soon.

The humanitarian situation is bleak: Only about a tenth of the displaced are living in proper refugee camps. The rest have been taken in by relatives or locals and are living in private back yards, homes, fields, mosques and school buildings. This amazing public generosity and concern are part of traditional Pashtun culture, but they cannot last indefinitely. While Pashtuns are the major ethnic group in the region, the Taliban -- whose followers are largely

Pashtun themselves -- has sought to denigrate and destroy traditional Pashtun culture.

The U.N. World Food Program has devised an innovative system to feed those displaced who are living outside the camps. It has set up 25 "humanitarian hubs" within walking distance of most of the people, and families who have registered with the government can pick up supplies.

"We bring food to where the people are, instead of people coming to where the food is," says Wolfgang Herbinger, head of the World Food Program in Pakistan. "But we will run out of food in a few weeks if pledges are not made now." The program is feeding 2.1 million people and is 60 percent short of its estimated costs to buy more food.

The fresh thinking in placing such hubs where other aid agencies provide electric fans, cooking utensils and other supplies could also prove useful in war zones in Afghanistan, where direct civilian aid is lacking.

The real battles this summer against the Taliban and al-Qaeda will be fought in Pakistan as much as in Afghanistan. By refusing to see this humanitarian crisis as an exercise in winning hearts and minds, however, the world seems to be sleepwalking its way to defeat.

Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist and a fellow at the Pacific Council on International Policy, is most recently the author of "Descent Into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia."