

Pakistan Quake Revives Civic Power

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By Ahmed Rashid

Pakistanis have astounded themselves with their own generosity since the catastrophic earthquake that hit the country on 8 October.

A tidal wave of ordinary people have rushed to help the victims of the earthquake, raising money or just hiring trucks and delivering goods to Kashmir.

These actions of civil society, not seen since the 1965 war against India, have united the nation and they will have significant political implications.

One thing is certain, Pakistan will never be the same again and the military regime of President Pervez Musharraf has the most to lose.

While the government has been criticised, the private response to the quake has been hailed.

Within hours of the devastating quake, doctors flew from Karachi and Lahore to set up medical camps in the worst hit areas.

Most of the doctors worked in government hospitals and they could only get release forms to allow them to go up north to Kashmir after the intervention of Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz.

From all over the country housewives sent truck loads of blankets and food, raising money from their relatives and friends in a frenzy of giving.

Many sent their own servants with the trucks to make sure the aid reached the right village or collection point.

The more astute donors linked up to long term projects connected with housing or rehabilitation.

Youthful Energy

The most extraordinary work has been done by students.

Beaconhouse, the largest school complex in the country, provided its premises and thousands of students and teachers to pack and send relief goods, who also went on fundraising sprees themselves.

The Salamat Academy another multiple school complex sent piping hot food three times a day for those Kashmiris who had been brought to Lahore hospitals for attention.

The Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) - Pakistan's top business school - sent members of its 'Trekking and Adventure Society' to survey villages in Kashmir that had been cut off by landslides.

They arrived several days before the army did, relayed back the villagers needs and students then sent up trucks filled with necessary goods.

LUMS's 4,500 students and staff have so far raised 10 million rupees (\$167,000).

The teams of trekkers, who also trained themselves in grave digging are still there - now with picks and shovels.

Pakistanis living abroad have sent money and goods and Pakistani doctors are still arriving from abroad to work in the tented hospitals in Kashmir.

But in Washington, the Pakistani Embassy has been a major hurdle, refusing to help coordinate fund raising, to facilitate the passage of doctors or to allow PIA - the national airline - to send relief goods unless the aid or money is earmarked for the 'President's Relief Fund'.

The Pakistan embassy in London has been more sensible, agreeing to send all goods without discrimination.

Transparency

So far the President's Relief Fund has received an estimated US \$100 million in donations, but experts estimate that private citizens donations are five to 10 times that sum.

The government has promised transparency and accountability for all the money it spends, but there is no sign yet of an independent watch dog committee to oversee government spending and prevent corruption.

And given high levels of corruption and waste, ordinary people are weary of contributing to government relief funds.

A week after the quake, the organisation Transparency International released its annual report on corruption placing Pakistan close to the top of its Corruption Perception Index for 2005.

Muslims have a religious obligation to give an annual zakat (tax) to the poor equivalent to 2.5% of an individual's personal wealth - the onrush of money since the earthquake has gone deeper.

According to research carried out by the Aga Khan Foundation, among all the Muslim nations, Pakistanis are considered the most generous in giving to charity.

Military Rule

So far at least the army has failed to profit from this coming together of the nation.

In fact the more people get involved the more critical they have become of the army's slow response to the quake and its apparent preoccupation with building a new general head quarters for itself in Islamabad or buying expensive weapon systems from abroad.

This opposition forced Gen Musharraf to, at least temporarily, postpone the purchase of F-16 fighter aircraft from the US at a cost of \$4.5bn although the purchase of six radar equipped aircraft at a cost of \$1bn from Sweden has gone ahead.

There is also a far greater desire for genuine democracy and civilian rule rather than manipulated elections held by the military.

Just before the quake the government held local council elections amid widespread allegations of vote-rigging.

With the current extent of public mobilization, it is unlikely that people will tolerate such an election again - especially in 2007 when general elections will be held.

For the last few years Pakistani intellectuals have complained about the public's apathy or lack of politicisation as people seemed grudgingly to have accepted another bout of military rule.

However the military may now be facing its biggest challenge in the past six years as people see their own power - civic power - unleashed after a long time.