

Pakistani flood relief must start with fighting corruption

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By Ahmed Rashid

At every turn, countries, charitable foundations, wealthy individuals and even schoolchildren are refusing to give the Pakistani government money to deal with the floods that have ruined as many as 20 million lives.

The European Union has angered Islamabad by giving its aid money to Western and Pakistani nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Leading international agencies and other countries have followed suit or sent relief goods rather than cash.

Pakistanis are scandalized and embarrassed that their politicians, bureaucrats and generals have fostered so much corruption for so long that nobody trusts them to deal fairly with the victims of this summer's historic floods. Yet early actions indicate the skeptics are right; feudal landlords and politicians have been accused, according to news reports, of breaching levees to save their lands or diverting relief goods to their constituents.

Since the flooding began five weeks ago, neither President Asif Ali Zardari nor Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani has sought to assemble a truly transparent mechanism that would receive and spend aid money. In contrast, Pakistan's army, central government, four provincial governments and National Assembly have each set up separate flood relief funds -- to which few Pakistanis are contributing because nobody trusts them.

With international financial institutions and the U.S. government assembling at least \$3 billion to help rebuild Pakistan's devastated infrastructure, it is time for our kleptomaniac rulers to get their act together and make efforts to restore withering public trust.

Pakistan's civilian government needs a trust fund along the lines of the one funding the Afghan government, army and police. Such a fund would not only monitor donated cash but help the government put together a nonpolitical reconstruction effort. It could give a voice to the competent Pakistani technocrats, NGO workers and economists that the government has so far ignored.

Such a reconstruction trust fund could be run by the World Bank and other international lending agencies. It should be overseen on the ground by independent Pakistani economists and social welfare figures. Pakistan's bureaucracy and army, who would be implementing the plans, could have seats at the table, but they should not have veto power over how the money comes in or is spent. The fund could also help plan long-term economic reforms such as expanding the tax base (only 2.3 million of the 170 million Pakistanis pay tax) and insisting that landlords pay income tax; this revenue is desperately needed, but no government has had the political will to implement such reforms.

No doubt, the ruling elite will cry that this would be intolerable for an independent nation and nuclear power. But the truth is that Pakistan lost its sovereignty a long time ago, when the ruling elite abandoned the poor and lost interest in economic development in favor of foreign loans, and the army willfully ceded territory and population to militant Islamic networks. Further, the dismal response to the flood damage has eroded the people's trust in government on a scale nearly matching 1971, when a typhoon in the eastern half of Pakistan drew no response from the western Pakistani elite, and the ruling elite lost East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh.

It is urgent that steps be taken immediately; already, a major fight has erupted between Islamabad and the four provinces over how to spend relief money. Opposition leader Nawaz Sharif claims that Islamabad is not providing funds to his province, Punjab; the poorest province, Balochistan, which was racked by insurgency even before it suffered enormous flood damage, is not receiving relief goods on a scale going to the other provinces. The northern-most province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has perhaps suffered the most infrastructure damage, but its calls for long-term aid have gone unanswered, according to news reports.

Meanwhile, the longtime politician Altaf Hussain, an acolyte of the military whose party controls Karachi, has called for a "French Revolution"-style uprising and a military-led government -- a threat to the fledgling democracy that has taken shape since 10 years of destructive military rule ended in 2007.

And amid all the destruction, the Pakistani Taliban is on the move; 100 people were killed in suicide bombings in Lahore and Quetta last week, for which the Pakistani Taliban asserted responsibility. Separatists in Balochistan are taking advantage of the chaos to mount an assassination campaign against non-Balochs in their province.

The political infighting and threats will worsen as the waters recede and haphazard reconstruction starts. Reconstruction left to the government will be dominated by the interests of local politicians and feudal lords. A rational, fair plan is needed to cope with the massive scale of destruction: 5,000 miles of road and rail washed away, up to a thousand bridges ruined, 7,000 schools and 400 health clinics destroyed, vast areas of the north still cut off. A fifth of Pakistan's agricultural land is under water, foreshadowing food shortages. The threat of epidemics among flood victims looms.

The Obama administration has done sterling work in its contributions and in prompting the international community to do more. Now, it should help Pakistan plan for the future. Sen. John Kerry has noted that "by helping Pakistan do it right, the U.S. can have a positive and lasting impact." First and foremost, Pakistanis need to know how the aid is going to be spent.

Ahmed Rashid, Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist, is most recently the author of "Descent Into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia."

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