

Post-Quake Giving Unites Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid/Lahore

An extraordinary outburst of giving by ordinary Pakistanis has almost swamped the grief for the tens of thousands of victims of the deadliest earthquake in the nation's history, which is expected to claim at least 100,000 dead and 300,000 injured.

In the days after the Oct. 8 earthquake, as the government and army floundered in their relief effort, Pakistani citizens stepped in. School and college students raised huge sums of money and their teachers bought food, water, blankets and tents and hired trucks to transport them to the earthquake zone. Homemakers, business executives, villagers, cooks, taxi drivers and even beggars have all done their bit to help.

Examples abound, but here are just a few from Lahore. The Lahore University of Management Sciences, 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 and relayed back the villagers' needs. Students then sent up trucks filled with necessary goods. The university's 4,500 students and staff have so far raised 10 million rupees, or \$160,000.

A well-known Lahore socialite raised \$50,000 from family and friends in three days and sent fully laden trucks to Kashmir, guarded by her servants.

A Lahore psychiatrist used her contacts to raise funds and then put together four fully equipped mobile hospitals, each with 10 volunteer doctors, and sent them to the earthquake zone in the first five days. Each hospital was provided everything from surgical equipment to cooking pots and generators. The army had yet to send its mobile hospitals.

An insurance company and the Beaconhouse School Systems, Pakistan's largest private school network, are now funding her to organize more mobile hospitals for specific needs such as psychiatry, and orthopedic and pediatric care.

Business executives and shopkeepers have stepped in. One young man who makes T-shirts for the American market became so frustrated with the lack of available tents that he bought a major tent company in Lahore so he could send tents to the worst-hit areas.

Thousands of underfunded Pakistani nongovernmental organizations, permanently reviled by the Islamic fundamentalist parties for being a bastion of Westernization and for employing "loose" women, have also been a major factor in mobilizing society. They have mounted text-message blitzes seeking blood donations and blankets, and reached the worst-hit villages before anyone else.

In a speech to the nation on Oct. 18, President Pervez Musharraf praised the people's efforts as he attempted to explain that the army's inability to deploy its resources immediately after the earthquake was due not to a lack of will, but to a lack of communications.

But the truth is that ordinary Pakistanis are deeply wary of contributing to government relief funds because of high levels of corruption and waste. The day Musharraf made his speech, the Berlin-based organization Transparency International released its annual Corruption Perception Index, which ranked Pakistan 144th out of 158.

Pakistan has unflaggingly held a similar position for a decade. So citizens entrust their donations to the socialite with reliable servants, the T-shirt manufacturer who knows his canvas tents, or a worthy NGO, rather than the President's Relief Fund.

So far the President's Fund has received an estimated \$70 million in donations, while some economists estimate that private citizens' donations amount to five to 10 times that.

The government has promised transparency and accountability of all the money it spends, including \$650 million it has received from abroad, but there is no sign yet of an independent watchdog to oversee spending and prevent corruption.

For the past few years, Pakistani intellectuals have complained about public apathy as everyone grudgingly came to accept another bout of military rule. The public response to the earthquake is an expression of the coming together of the nation after a long fallow period. What this will mean for the future of the government and Musharraf is now the hottest topic of debate and discussion.