

The Earthquake in Kashmir

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The massive destruction caused by the earthquake in India and Pakistan has thrown up huge challenges of rescue, relief and rehabilitation. The magnitude of the destruction means that reconstruction and rehabilitation in the affected areas is going to be a long process. There are reports that the death toll in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) and Northern Territories could cross 50,000. The losses in India have been comparatively less, and despite the huge difficulties of terrain authorities have effectively engaged in overcoming the effects of the tragedy. The conditions in PoK however, have become unmanageable for the Pakistani state and have led to a desperate appeal for massive international aid. Even as it geared to meet the huge challenges of rescue, relief and rehabilitation in Jammu and Kashmir, India was quick to offer all help and assistance to Pakistan, and relief has already been rushed to Islamabad. The Indian offer to open three relief and medical centres along the Line of Control (LoC) in the Uri, Tangdhar and the Poonch sectors for the victims on the Pakistani side, if accepted by Pakistan, will be a big boon to the people and follows appeals by Indian Kashmiris to help divided families and the suffering people on the other side. The disaster could have significant implications for future politics on both sides of Kashmir, internal politics in Pakistan, and possibly Indo-Pak relations.

Dealing with disasters of this magnitude is never easy and though the relief and rescue operations led by the armed forces took off quickly there were a few initial reports of resentment against the Jammu and Kashmir authorities for not responding promptly with relief supplies. While the Central and state governments have announced large amounts of aid for the affected families, there were the inevitable fears about proper disbursement of relief and funds. The economy of the state has suffered enormously, and the population is going to need both material and

psychological support. The rugged terrain, limited communication network, and the onset of winter have accentuated the existing problems. At another level, some sections of the separatists like the Hurriyat have tried to take advantage of this disaster to malign the Indian government and gain political mileage. The separatist Hurriyat leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq on October 11, 2005 criticised the lack of response from civil society including corporate houses—though funds have not been a problem. Ironically, these very leaders have for years tried to keep Kashmir isolated from the Indian mainstream and corporate investments. Since then of course even the corporate sector has announced aid and help for reconstruction.

The devastated region in PoK has been for over a decade the epicentre of terrorism directed against India. Through the relief and rescue, India has had to be prepared to meet the threats from cross-LoC terrorism. Opinion is divided over how the earthquake affected the terrorists. Initial reports about the number of militants killed due to the destruction of their camps in the earthquake, the specific militant outfits affected, as well as the extent of damage to terrorist infrastructure in PoK led to assessments that there could be a decline in terrorist activity. Some feel that greater international and Pakistani civilian pressure would be brought upon militant activity leading to closure of camps, which in turn could help the peace process with India.

However, despite the terrible nature of the disaster on both sides of the LoC, a series of terrorist attacks have been cynically unleashed on Jammu and Kashmir since October 8, 2005. The most shocking of these was the attack on October 18, 2005 in Srinagar, in which the Minister of State for Education, Ghulam Nabi Lone was killed and the CPI (M) leader, Yusuf Ali Tarigami narrowly escaped. There are reports that terrorists are trying to obstruct relief activities being carried out by the security and paramilitary forces in far-flung areas of the state. It has been reported that militant groups like the Lashkar-e-Toiba, and the Jaish-e-Mohammad have launched relief and rehabilitation programmes in Muzaffarabad and adjoining areas in PoK, with the aim of expanding and consolidating their influence and presence. Therefore, despite the ceasefire announced by Hizbul Mujahideen leader Syed Salahuddin soon after the earthquake, no fundamental change in the attitude of the terrorist outfits has been witnessed or can be expected.

The Pakistani military regime has been entirely unprepared for handling such disasters and is desperately trying to meet the devastating impact of the earthquake. According to the initial estimates by the United Nations over two million people in PoK and northern parts of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) have been affected by the earthquake. There is widespread destruction as concrete structures have been reduced to rubble. Trapped in collapsing school buildings, a large number of children died. According to one report, at least 7,000 school buildings in the public sector and 1,000 in the private sector have either collapsed or been damaged in five districts of the NWFP. Many areas became inaccessible due to massive landslides. The initial delay in relief assistance can be attributed to factors like lack of realization regarding the magnitude of the disaster, communication breakdown in the worst affected areas, lack of adequate logistic infrastructure, the absence of a disaster management mechanism, coupled with inclement weather. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz explaining government's delayed response said that the local government system had completely collapsed due to the quake. While monetary and technical assistance and relief supplies are flowing in, the efficient distribution of these remains a problem. In the absence of a stable economy in PoK there is apprehension, as to what the future holds for the populace. In the meantime, the Pakistan government is addressing what has perforce become a security agenda for the long term. An 'Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority' has been established which will rebuild infrastructure in the affected areas. The UN has given a 10-year timeline for completing the reconstruction process, while Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz estimates that reconstruction of damaged areas may take five years. Reports also suggest that the Planning Commission is preparing a 'massive reconstruction plan' which will focus not just on the rehabilitation of affected areas, but also on developing tourism on modern lines.

The Pakistan government has had to face intense anger from those affected, the civil society, as well as from the political opposition for its weak rescue efforts. The unforeseen calamity has the potential to create ripples in Pakistan's polity. The government has been criticised for sending helicopters to attack South Waziristan rather than to help in relief efforts. It has been said that the Pakistan army has no moral ground for continuing military operations in the tribal areas of South and North Waziristan. As Pakistan gets more involved with re-building activities, there is a possibility that the Afghan resistance would benefit. Also, existing resentment in the

Northern Areas could receive a boost in the wake of the earthquake, creating problems for the Federal government. The seriousness of the situation in these areas can be gauged from a press note by the Northern Areas Home Department, claiming that the situation in Northern Areas, especially in Gilgit, had worsened in the last 18 months due to the uncompromising attitude of the Ulema of both sects. The differences culminated in violence, leading to a curfew adding to the people's woes. Dissatisfaction with Pakistan Army led-relief efforts could give a fillip to the mainstream political parties in the long term.

It should have been natural – if there were close political and normal ties – for India and Pakistan to work together in rescue and rehabilitation efforts in Kashmir. But there are suspicions and security concerns that prevent full cooperation. The Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had of course spoken to Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf on October 8, 2005 to condole the devastation caused by the earthquake. He offered any rescue or relief measures "deemed appropriate" by the Pakistani leadership. The Indian armed forces too offered to undertake rescue missions. Yet, it is obvious that the political and security sensitivities weigh heavily on the minds of the Pakistani leadership. This is evident in the denial by Pakistan's Director-General of Inter-Services Public Relations, Shaukat Sultan, that Indian soldiers had crossed the LoC to help repair one of its army bunkers. The Indian army too later stated that the Indian soldiers crossed the LoC to hand over tools for rescue as a humanitarian gesture. India has provided relief material including tents, blankets, food items and medicines to Pakistan by air and train. The Pakistan government has reportedly taken a decision to import around 50,000 tents from India. It has however rejected taking the offer of helicopters from India, badly needed for rescue and relief operations in Pakistan. President Musharraf said that they were welcome but without the Indian pilots, because of certain "sensitivities." India did not pursue the matter further, and Pakistan had to finally depend on US helicopters and NATO forces for rescue work.

However, it is obvious that the level of understanding between the two countries during this exacting time has reached a very different plane. India allowed Pakistani nationals possessing LoC entry permits to return to Pakistan via Wagah due to the suspension of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service. And on a request made by the Indian side, Pakistan agreed to overlook the movement of Indian army helicopters in the border areas of

Uri and Tangdhar for rescuing its troops and civilians. The existing Agreement on Prevention of Air Space Violations and for Permitting Overflights and Landings by Military Aircrafts between India and Pakistan signed on April 6, 1991, was activated, and according to a statement by the Indian External Affairs Ministry, on October 15, 2005 India was willing to permit Pakistan's helicopters to fly in the no fly zone, (one km along the LoC) provided information concerning the proposed sorties was communicated as early as possible to the Director-General Military Operations (DGMO) on the Indian side. In keeping with the spirit of cooperation, President Musharraf agreed to allow the movement of people across the LoC, just as the Indian government re-activated the dormant telecommunication links between two sides of the LoC.

A mature and enlightened approach in providing help to the quake-affected people across the LoC, motivated by genuinely humanitarian considerations, is likely to lead to greater goodwill for the Government and the people of India. Any unrealistic offers however generous, could be perceived as efforts of 'diplomatic one-upmanship'. It is obvious that Pakistan's resources are insufficient to meet the long-term requirements of reconstruction and rehabilitation, and agreeing to assistance from India could reflect positively in the two countries attitudes towards each other. This is evident in the sentiments expressed in an editorial in the leading Pakistani daily *The Dawn* dated October 16, 2005, which expressed appreciation of India's help. It states that, "India's offer to send relief goods this time has been timely not just for the earthquake affected people but also for the confidence building process between the two countries."

India's diplomacy towards Pakistan following the October 8 tragedy has been marked by a desire to help, and to be seen as being helpful, cooperative and generous. In the coming days the three proposed Indian relief and medical centers could make a real difference to reduce the suffering of Kashmiris across the LoC. As per rough estimates, 10,792 quake-hit families on the Indian side living in Poonch, Uri, Tangdhar and Teetwal have close relatives across the line in PoK. If Pakistan agrees it should be possible for some Indian voluntary organizations to help with relief work further inside PoK.

However, while India has provided and will continue to provide significant amounts of assistance for disaster relief requested by Pakistan, would it lead to a long-term change in Islamabad's India policy? It is difficult

to foresee a basic change in Pakistan's attitude on Kashmir and Siachen soon. At the popular level, however, one can imagine a more favourable image of India resulting from the very willing and spontaneous help made available to the hapless people of Kashmir across the LoC. The ineffective handling of the disaster's effects by the large Pakistani military deployed in PoK may also have an impact on Pakistan's legitimacy and standing among the people of the area and its claims to represent the Kashmiri 'cause'.

On its side, India has declined international aid as it had done earlier for the post-Tsunami relief and rehabilitation. In both instances the Indian state, the armed forces, the local government and the civil society have shown a remarkable sense of confidence and ability to deal with disasters. However, in disasters of such magnitude the relief and rescue needs are large. It may be useful for India to allow selected international aid agencies to visit the affected areas, see for themselves the relief and rehabilitation work, and provide certain specialised kinds of technical help and equipment that may be short in supply. If such aid is properly regulated and managed India can benefit from the international goodwill and deal even more effectively with the challenges, and plug some of the weaknesses.

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