

Balakot After The Earthquake
by

Pervez Hoodbhoy

Along with a group of faculty, staff and students from my university in Islamabad, I returned from Balakot today (Thursday, Oct 13, 2005). Close to the centre of last Saturday's earthquake, this mountainous tourist base town, situated on the banks of the Kunhar River, has been destroyed. There is the rubble of collapsed buildings and the gut-wrenching smell of decaying corpses. The rats have it good; the one I accidentally stepped upon was already fat. If there is indeed a plan to clear the concrete rubble in and around the town, nobody seems to have any clue. But the Balakotis are taking it in their stride – nose masks are everywhere.

But there is good news. We were just one of countless groups of ordinary citizens that were on the move after the enormity of last Saturday's earthquake became apparent. The Mansehra to Balakot road, finally forced open by huge army bulldozers, is now lined with relief trucks bursting with supplies donated by people across the country. This is one of those rare times that I have seen our people feel and move together as a nation. Even the armed bandits who waylay relief supplies – to guard against whom soldiers with automatic weapons stand at alert every few hundred yards – cannot destroy this moment.

Islamic groups from across the country have also arrived. Some bring relief supplies; others simply harangue those who have lost loved ones and livelihoods that their misdeeds brought about this catastrophe. None seem to have an explanation for why God's wrath was especially directed to mosques, madrassas, and schools – all of which have collapsed in huge numbers. And none say why thousands of the faithful have been buried alive in this sacred month of fasting.

Aid from across the world is also making its way, and the United States is here too. Double bladed Chinook helicopters, diverted from fighting Al-Qaida in Afghanistan, now fly over the heartland of jihad and the militant training camps in Mansehra to drop food and tents a few miles beyond. Temporarily birds of peace instead of war, they do immensely more to calm angry Islamists than the reams of glossy propaganda put out by the US information services in Pakistan.

Their visibility makes relief choppers terrific propaganda, for good or for worse. This is undoubtedly why the Pakistani government refused an Indian offer to send in helicopters for relief work in and around Muzaffarabad, the flattened capital of Pakistani administered Kashmir. Sadly, in spite of a much celebrated peace process, Pakistan refuses visas to Indian peace groups and activists that seek to help in the relief effort. It is still not too late to open this door and let Pakistanis, Indians and Kashmiris help each other.

The challenges are many. The aid is still too little. There are simply not enough tents, blankets, and warm clothes to go around. Hundreds of tent clusters have come up, but

thousands of families remain out under the skies, facing rain and hail, and with dread in their hearts. These families have lost everything but the tattered clothes on their backs. Some even lost the land they had lived upon for generations – the top soil simply slid away, leaving behind hard rock and rubble.

Sadly, the aid is sometimes of the wrong kind. Tons of clothes, lovingly donated by citizens around Pakistan, lie among the garbage and rubble throughout the town. The clothes are little use to the people raised in the conservative communities in these cold, high mountains.

Worst of all, the aid is not getting to those most affected. Hundreds of destroyed communities are scattered deep in the mountains. We saw helicopters attempt aerial drops; landing is impossible in most places. But people told us that they often miss and the supplies land up thousands of feet below or in deep forests. Distribution is haphazard and uncoordinated, done with little thought. We saw relief workers throw packets of food and clothes from the top of trucks, and a subsequent riot. Hustlers thrive, the weak watch passively.

The clock is ticking. In barely two months from now, the mountains will get their first snowfall and temperatures will plummet below zero. Millions may have been made homeless. Those without shelter will die. Tents will not do. From a special university fund we have pledged a dozen families to rebuild their homes. But ten thousand or more families will need homes in the Mansehra-Balakot-Kaghan area alone, not to speak of adjoining Kashmir. The task of saving lives has barely begun.

For me personally, there is a sense of dejavu. Nearly 31 years ago, on 25th December 1974, a powerful earthquake had flattened towns along the Karakorum Highway killing nearly 10,000 people. I had traveled with a university team into the same mountains for similar relief work. Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had made a passionate appeal for funds around the world, taken a token helicopter trip to the destroyed town of Besham, and made fantastic promises of relief and rehabilitation. Hundreds of millions of dollars in relief funds received from abroad mysteriously disappeared. Some well-informed people believe that those funds were used to kick off Pakistan's secret nuclear program.

Shall the present government do better? This will only be if citizens organize themselves to play a more direct role in relief and rehabilitation for the long term. Civil society groups must now assert themselves. They must demand a voice in planning and implementing the reconstruction effort and, along with international donors, transparency and public auditing of where aid is spent.

The author is a professor at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad