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Pakistan: Aid and opportunity

The natural disaster that struck Pakistan has opened the floodgates of aid as numerous agencies collect money in the name of relief and redevelopment.

People in many other parts of the world respond generously to such appeals without questioning how the recipient government will distribute the aid.

Unfortunately, the government of Pakistan does not enjoy the trust of many expatriates, who normally become one of the largest sources of donations in such calamities. They have valid reasons for caution, particularly government corruption.

NGOs have their own mismanagement issues. Millions of dollars raised in the name of development often are misused and misappropriated.

In such a situation, how does one help?

I have received emails from 100 different aid agencies, religious organizations, private funds and international organizations assuring me that my donation will reach its destination only in their capable hands.

Most of them claim to have such an amazing setup in the works that the devastated city of Muzaffarabad will be up and running in no time once my money is in the pipeline.

Yet it frustrates me that, even as they solicit donations, most of these organizations seem to have no clear idea as to what they are going to do with the money.

The government of Pakistan might not enjoy a reputation for unblemished honesty, but I feel a donation to the President's Quake Relief Fund is the most effective response, as I know the money will at least be used inside Pakistan. Such donations can be made directly to the embassy or consulate, but no tax receipt is issued.

Perhaps the Pakistani government will realize that this reconstruction effort provides an opportunity for it to re-establish its credibility. To do so, it must address two important factors that were responsible for the high fatality rate:

- First, the delay in rescue efforts was due to landslides that occurred because of excessive logging that resulted in erosion.
- Second, it has been established beyond doubt that unsuitable architectural styles and shoddy construction methods were the main reasons for the large number of fatalities in this tragedy.

How many organizations will take the time to sit down and employ architects who can design buildings for areas where the current standard of construction is inappropriate for the geography of the region?

After every tragedy, rebuilding becomes a priority. In this case, it is even more important because there is not much left standing in Kashmir's worst hit areas anyway.

One tragic aspect of this entire episode is the high number of military casualties, not revealed by either India or Pakistan due to the strategic importance of the region.

The Pakistani military remains the best organized and best trained outfit to handle such situations but now the army itself is reeling from its own massive casualties suffered in the earthquake.

Muzaffarabad is not a small municipal town; it is the capital of Azad (Free) Kashmir and as such contains the region's governmental infrastructure, which has taken a massive hit.

Help coming into the region will take time but, as with the tsunami in southeast Asia, local people will not wait for the government before starting to rebuild. They are self-sufficient and self-reliant people and will begin rebuilding from the rubble.

The government will build schools and hospitals in due time but the most important thing international aid agencies and funding organizations can do is to insist on improving the quality and standard of the construction. The government of Pakistan would do well to tap foreign expertise in this area and do so quickly.

Let there be open discussion about construction techniques: traditional styles that have stood the test of time and modern earthquake-proof designs, versus the concrete death traps that have been the standard style for past 30 years.

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