

Pakistan: No Burial For Balakot

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From under the rubble of collapsed buildings, a gut-wrenching smell of decaying corpses now fills the town. 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 ó nose masks are everywhere.

From this destroyed mountainous tourist base town, situated on the banks of the Kunhar river, a relief group from my university returned today (Thursday, Oct 13, 2005). We were just one of the dozens of groups of ordinary citizens that were spontaneously galvanized into action after the enormity of last Saturday's earthquake became apparent.

There is good news. The Mansehra to Balakot road stretch, finally forced open by huge army bulldozers and earth moving machinery, is now open to relief trucks and goods donated across the country are piled to the roofs. If there ever was a time when the people of Pakistan moved together, this is it. Even the armed bandits who waylay relief supplies ó to guard against whom soldiers with automatic weapons stand at alert every few hundred yards ó cannot destroy the euphoria of having this solitary moment of unspoiled national unity.

Aid from across the world is making its way, and the United States is here too. Double bladed Chinook helicopters, diverted from fighting Al-Qaida in Afghanistan, weave their way through the mountains. They 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 soothe the highly Islamic, highly conservative, bearded mountain people than the reams of silly propaganda on glossy paper 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. In spite of a much celebrated peace process, Pakistan has also not issued visas to Indian peace groups and activists that seek participation in the relief effort.

Islamic groups from across the country have also arrived. Some bring relief supplies, others simply harangue poor goat herders and simple tillers of the soil to tell them 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 ó 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.

Now for the bad news: the aid is still too little, often of the wrong kind, and is not getting to those most affected. Hundreds of destroyed communities lie 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. In Balakot we saw relief workers simply throw packets of food and clothes from the top of trucks, and a subsequent riot. Hustlers thrive, the weak watch passively. Tons of clothes, lovingly donated and packed by citizens

around Pakistan, but mostly useless because of specific cultural and climatic conditions, are mixed and scattered with garbage and rubble throughout the town.

For me personally, there was 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 Zulfiqar 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 for rehabilitation. But then 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, and international donors, demand transparency and accounts are available for public audit.

The clock is ticking. In barely two months from now, the mountains will get their first snowfall and temperatures will plummet below zero. 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 as the top soil simply slid away, leaving behind hard rock and rubble. Those without shelter will die. From a special university fund we have pledged a dozen families to rebuild their houses but ten thousand or more will be needed in the Mansehra-Balakot-Kaghan area alone, not to speak of adjoining Kashmir. Relief groups and donors around the world must make reconstruction of homes their primary goal.

P.S.

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