

Devastating quake kills 20,000 in Pakistan and India

Peter Symonds
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A major earthquake on Saturday morning measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale has devastated cities, towns and villages across northern Pakistan. The official death toll in Pakistan reached 19,369 yesterday with over 42,000 people injured, but casualties are expected to climb further as rescue workers reach outlying areas. Hundreds more were killed in Indian-controlled Kashmir. The worst affected in both countries were the poor who lived in cheap housing built of mud brick and wood.

Already higher casualty figures are being mooted. Tariq Farooq, Minister for Communication and Works in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir (Azad Kashmir), estimated yesterday that 30,000 had died in that province alone. "There are cities, there are towns which have been completely destroyed. Muzaffarabad [Azad Kashmir's provincial capital] is devastated," he said. The death toll in the provincial capital is currently 11,000.

Farooq explained that the worst affected area was Bagh, 40 km southeast of Muzaffarabad where between 6,000 and 7,000 are estimated to have died in the town and adjoining villages. "There are no survivors in villages like Jaglari, Kufalgarh, Harigal and Baniyali in Bagh district," he told the *International News*. "People have been devoured by the earth." Kashmiri Affairs Minister Faisal Hayat said that over half of Azad Kashmir's population of 2.4 million had been affected by the quake.

Another 9,000 people believed dead in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NSFP), including 7,000 in Hazara. Many of the victims were children attending Saturday morning classes. At least six schools collapsed in the town of Balakot, trapping hundreds of children. Parents and other locals frantically worked with picks, shovels and their bare hands to reach those trapped in the rubble. The death toll is estimated as 2,500 for the Balakot and seven surrounding villages.

A *Sydney Morning Herald* article explained: "The Balakot region was a scene of devastation. Perhaps half of the concrete houses had collapsed and dozens of bodies lay in the open. Residents complained about the lack of help. The road into the town had been blocked by landslides, and it was only possible to reach it on foot." Rescue workers had only reached about 40 percent of the areas in Pakistan affected by the quake. Tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of people have been left homeless,

without food and medicine and, in some areas, exposed to torrential rain and hailstorms.

The epicentre was near Muzaffarabad and the tremors were felt as far away as New Delhi and Kabul. The quake was followed by about 20 significant aftershocks, measuring up to 6.2 on the Richter scale. In eastern Afghanistan, four children were crushed to death when the mud walls of their home collapsed.

In the Pakistani capital of Islamabad, the Margala Towers—a five-tower upmarket apartment complex—was badly damaged. At least 35 people were killed when two of the five blocks collapsed. On special orders from the Interior Ministry, a case has already been registered against the owners and contractors and the Capital Development Authority for the use of substandard construction materials. No such legal action is being taken over the countless shoddily built homes of the poor destroyed by the quake.

Most of the nearly 700 deaths in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir occurred close to the heavily-militarised Line of Control (LoC) that separates the Pakistani and Indian armies. According to the Union Home Ministry, the toll stood at 656 late last night—including 589 in the Kashmir Valley and 17 in Jammu. At least 258 people were killed in Karnah near the LoC and further deaths occurred in Uri—the last Indian town on the road connecting the Pakistan- and Indian-controlled portions of Kashmir.

As in Pakistan, casualty figures are expected to increase sharply. A state government official told the *Hindustan Times*: "The toll is expected to rise as there is no news from four villages in Teetwal area." He pointed out that 3,000 houses had been destroyed in the town of Tangdhar alone.

The media has speculated that the disaster may assist in ending the decades old dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh rang Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to offer Indian assistance for relief and rescue operations. However, New Delhi and Islamabad could just as readily resort to sabre rattling as a means of diverting the social tensions produced by the catastrophe.

In fact, tight military restrictions in the quake-affected areas, including roadblocks and patrols, have hampered rescue

operations in both countries. One indication of the substantial army presence in these areas is the size of the military casualties—at least 200 Pakistani and 50 Indian defence personnel died in the quake. The Indian army has taken control of the town of Uri and barred the media. Survivors complained to the *Hindustan Times* that relief and rescue efforts had been inadequate.

The glaring limitation of relief efforts has already provoked criticisms in Pakistan. An editorial in the *International News* on Sunday declared: “On the ground, however, confusion reigned supreme. There were obvious signs of lack of planning as the emergency services swung into action. It was obvious that the authorities were ill prepared and ill-equipped to deal with a catastrophe on this scale. While many people, including ordinary citizens, battled tirelessly to help those trapped underneath the rubble, their courage and sense of duty were clearly not a substitute for a strategy.”

The newspaper, however, quickly sought to deflect blame from President Musharraf, noting that he and his ministers “were promptly on the scene of the disaster in Islamabad”. It concluded with an appeal for national unity, declaring: “At this terrible moment in our history, let us all come forward with a single-minded aim: to ease the suffering of those devastated by this cruel act of nature. Let us leave the probing questions and post mortems for another day.”

The *Daily Times* was even more blatant in its apologies for the Musharraf regime. In its editorial entitled “Getting the right perspective on the earthquake,” the newspaper declared: “TV channels have subjected the government to criticism and unconsciously helped spread the impression that [the] earthquake tragedy was caused by the government simply because rescue work did not begin quickly enough. The truth is that no government anywhere, particularly in the Third World, can be prepared for large-scale post-disaster management.”

The editorial berated critics who have pointed to the lack of building standards and poor construction as a major contributing factor to the high death toll. Unlike regulations for fire prevention, it argued, “earthquakes are a totally different category. Depending on scale, even an economic superpower may be humbled by a natural disaster... This scale of natural calamity is rare and defence against it is almost impossible.” The commentator then compared the death toll in Pakistan favourably with that of the Iranian earthquake that claimed 32,000 lives in 2003 and the major tremor in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2001 that killed 11,500.

It is certainly true that individual earthquakes are notoriously difficult to predict with any accuracy. But the region of Kashmir and northern Pakistan struck on Saturday lies on the fault lines of the Eurasian and Indian tectonic plates and is regularly hit by substantial tremors. There is no excuse for the lack of disaster planning and proper emergency services and poor communications and transport, or the failure to ensure that buildings are capable of withstanding sizeable quakes. Both

India and Pakistan spend billions of dollars every year maintaining huge armies equipped with expensive, sophisticated weaponry along the LoC.

Moreover, it is not simply the Pakistani and Indian governments that are responsible. The economic and social backwardness of these two countries is the legacy of decades of colonial rule and subsequent economic exploitation by the imperialist powers. As in the aftermath of the December 26 tsunami, the US, European Union and other major powers have once again demonstrated their indifference and contempt for the plight of the impoverished masses of the Indian subcontinent.

In statements reeking of insincerity, US President George Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other so-called world leaders have expressed their sympathy for the victims. A pittance of international aid has been pledged to help relief efforts in India and Pakistan. Washington has offered military helicopters and \$100,000 in emergency funding; the EU has promised \$US3.8 million and individual European countries have dispatched a small number of rescue teams. Australia has offered \$US380,000 and the World Bank \$20 million. Even if the aid actually arrives, it is completely inadequate to meet the needs of hundreds of thousands of people who have been affected.

The argument of the *Daily Times* editorial is that Pakistan, like Iran, India, and “even an economic superpower” can do nothing in the face of natural disasters of such a scale. The oblique reference to the Bush administration’s appalling contempt for the victims of Hurricane Katrina is meant to be the clincher—if Washington is powerless in the face of such catastrophes, then how can Islamabad be expected to do better! In fact, the comment simply underscores the bankruptcy of the profit system as a whole: the techniques and resources exist to ensure that the impact of such disasters is minimal, but the operation of the capitalist market guarantees that ordinary working people—whether in Muzaffarabad or New Orleans—are left at the mercies of the forces of nature.



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