

After the Kashmir earthquake, warnings of a second disaster

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Even as the toll following the October 8 earthquake in northern Pakistan and India continues to rise, aid workers are warning of a second disaster. Hundreds of thousands of people are facing the Himalayan winter without shelter or adequate supplies of food, clothing and medicine.

Officially the number of dead is over 53,000 in Pakistan but local authorities have put the figure as high as 79,000. More than 3 million people have been affected by the disaster, at least a quarter of them in desperate need of assistance. Two weeks after the quake, rescue workers have still not been able to get supplies to about 15 percent of the affected areas.

Altuf Musani, World Health Organisation coordinator in Muzaffarabad, warned that many survivors are living in temperatures below freezing and face the danger of hypothermia. Many lack even shelter. Malang Khan, a survivor from the isolated Kot Gallah village, told the *Washington Post*: “First we lost people in the quake, now we will die because of cold and hunger.”

General Farooq Ahmed, who is overseeing Pakistan’s relief operation, told *Bloomberg.com* that only 20,000 tents designed for winter had been delivered and that Pakistan urgently needed 260,000 tents. Medical supplies and doctors are also needed, along with transport, particularly helicopters and aircraft, to ferry supplies into isolated areas.

An article in the *Guardian* described injured still streaming into makeshift hospitals in Balakot on Sunday. By mid-afternoon 420 patients had passed through one United Arab Emirates army field hospital, about 70 percent with infected wounds and many receiving treatment for the first time. “It’s unbelievable. We’ve seen wounds here that we’ve never seen before. There is no textbook for this,” one doctor said.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was compelled to issue a veiled criticism last Thursday of the lack of international aid. Calling for further assistance from governments around the world, he warned that thousands of people could die of cold or illness. “Many of them [survivors] have no blankets or tents to protect them against the merciless Himalayan winter. That means a second, massive wave of death will happen if we do not step up our efforts now,” Annan wrote.

UN emergency relief chief Jan Egeland told the BBC last week that his organisation had never seen such a “logistical nightmare”, saying it was worse than the Asian tsunami. An estimated 500,000 people are stranded in remote mountain villages cut off from aid and supplies by landslides. Due to the lack of air transport, mules are being used in some areas.

Egeland called for “a second Berlin airlift” to get assistance into affected areas and evacuate tens of thousands of stranded victims before winter sets in. He noted that only \$US86 million had been pledged towards the UN appeal for \$312 million for relief work.

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf is under pressure as anger mounts over the inadequacy of relief operations. Speaking to *adnki.com*, Hamid Gul, former head of the military’s Inter Service Intelligence (ISI), drew a comparison with the 1970 cyclone that hit East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, killing an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 people and helping to fuel the separatist uprising. “[The] poor response in a flood relief operation in 1970 caused massive resentment among Pakistan’s Bengali population, which finally translated into a mutiny, and Pakistan lost one of its parts,” he warned.

Desperate to placate criticisms, Musharraf has launched the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority headed by the army’s chief

engineer, Lieutenant-General Mohammad Zubair, to rebuild the affected areas, including roads, bridges, houses, government buildings, schools and private buildings. He described the international aid pledged of \$620 million as “totally inadequate,” saying that at least \$5 billion was needed for reconstruction.

In contrast, many ordinary Pakistanis have flocked to Muzaffarabad and other devastated areas to provide help. A relief worker told the *Scotsman*: “The journey by road from Islamabad to Muzaffarabad should take between seven and eight hours but instead it is taking five days. Our workers have told us the roads are completely blocked with people from other parts of Pakistan driving to the area in their cars with clothing and blankets.”

Fearing the potential for political opposition, Musharraf is attempting to keep the military in charge. He has asked donors to use the 45 collection points designated by the army relief network in the devastated area. The measure is also aimed at reining in various Islamic fundamentalist groups, whose activities have been highlighted in the US media in particular.

An article in the *New York Times* noted groups Jamaat ud-Dawa, which is connected to the Islamic fundamentalist Lashkar-e-Taiba, was active in providing food and other essentials, attending to the injured and burying the dead. Altaf Kyani, 35, told the newspaper: “Only the mujahedeen are helping ... One hour after the earthquake, they were here helping pull people out of the rubble. The army only came on the fourth day.”

Musharraf is under pressure from Washington to shut down or control such groups, which have been fighting a protracted guerrilla war to end Indian control over Jammu and Kashmir. The US has pushed for a settlement between India and Pakistan, including over divided Kashmir, as the ongoing rivalry between the two countries threatens US interests in the region.

Limited cooperation between the two countries has taken place after the quake. Proposals to open the Line of Control between the two sides have been dragged out due to deep suspicion and political jockeying in both camps. Successive Indian and Pakistani governments have stirred up nationalist sentiment to divert attention from social and political problems at home.

The Bush administration is concerned to shore up the

Musharraf regime, which has backed its so-called war on terrorism and the US ousting of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The *Washington Post* commented: “Stability in Pakistan, the only Islamic country with a nuclear weapon ... is critical to U.S. interests in South Asia.” US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made an unscheduled two-hour visit to Pakistan on October 12 to lend support to Musharraf.

As the disaster worsens, however, especially as winter sets in, the natural calamity could easily turn into a political crisis as the death toll mounts and anger grows over the regime’s callous indifference to the fate of hundreds of thousands.

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