

Hundreds dead in earthquake in Pakistan

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An earthquake measuring 6.4 on the Richter scale struck the south-western Balochistan area of Pakistan early Wednesday morning, reducing houses to rubble, killing hundreds of people and leaving about 50,000 homeless. Many of those who lost their homes are sleeping outside in freezing temperatures and are not receiving adequate aid.

After-shocks are continuing to rock the affected area, which is located some 60 kilometres north of Quetta, the capital of Balochistan, and about 640 kilometres southwest of the national capital, Islamabad. According to a UNICEF report published on October 31, at least 2,000 houses and 128 schools were damaged and a number of roads blocked.

The largest number of deaths occurred in villages in the hilly area of Ziarat Valley. Numerous mud-brick and timber houses collapsed, burying the occupants in debris. Faisal Edhi of the Edhi Foundation, Pakistan's largest ambulance service, told *Bloomberg*: "We think by the end of the operation the total number of deaths may approach 400."

The earthquake is the worst in Pakistan since the 7.6 magnitude quake that devastated northwest Pakistan and Kashmir in October 2005, killing at least 74,000 people and displacing 3.5 million. An earthquake in Balochistan in 1935 flattened Quetta and claimed some 30,000 lives.

On Thursday, Pakistan president Asif Al Zardari expressed "grief about the loss of life" at a meeting of the Balochistan Reconciliation Committee. The government has declared a state of emergency in the province. The army and the Frontier Corps—a paramilitary force—have been mobilised for rescue and relief operations. The disaster management authority has announced it is sending tents, blankets, food and medical help.

Aid, however, has been slow to reach the worst

affected areas. The *Dawn* reported on Friday: "For more than 40 hours since the earthquake brought down their dwellings, the residents of Qilla Charri village in Ziarat looked with desperate eyes towards a number of helicopters flying in the valleys and mountains close by. But, for the sixty odd families living in the village, relief was yet to make its way."

The media has reported desperation and anger among people over the progress of the rescue operation. Moosa Kaleem, a survivor in Ziarat, told *Associated Press*: "The earthquake destroyed our houses, but now the government's slow response is killing us. We cannot spend another night in this chilling weather, especially the kids."

Dilawar Kakar, the mayor of Ziarat district, told AP: "I am not satisfied with this operation. The help we expected from the provincial and federal government, we are not getting. It is very slow."

President Zardari announced on Thursday that his government will pay 300,000 rupees (\$US3,600) as compensation for each dead person and 100,000 rupees to each injured survivor and promised ongoing assistance. The experience of the Pakistani people with governments, civilian and military, leaves little reason to expect that such promises will be fulfilled.

Three years after the 2005 earthquake, *Relief web* commented last month: "Disappointment and fear still loom on the faces of survivors, marking the third anniversary of the devastating earthquake while spending life in houses made of steel sheets. Facilities like latrines/bathrooms; sanitation and clean drinking water are still a distant dream for the ill-fated victims who are waiting for relocation and rehabilitation."

Communities in Balochistan and Sind provinces that were devastated by floods in July 2007 are also still in dire straits.

Balochistan is Pakistan's largest province and rich in mineral resources and natural gas. However, the

majority of its population of 10 million live in poverty-stricken conditions, without adequate infrastructure and services. Exploiting widespread social discontent, Baloch nationalist organisations have been fighting a low-level civil war for an independent state since the late 1960s.

In 2004, the former military regime of President Pervez Musharraf ordered the Pakistani army to wage a brutal campaign of repression across the province, resulting in hundreds of killings and arbitrary arrests.

Fears have been expressed in the Pakistani press that an inadequate relief response to the latest disaster could lead to a resurgence of separatist agitation. The *News* editorialised on Friday: "The quake in Balochistan must also be used as an opportunity to assure the people of the province that the rest of the nation stands by them. Such opportunities have been missed in the past. The same mistakes must not be made again."

However, the earthquake has taken place, amid a global financial crisis that has left the Pakistani state on the verge of bankruptcy. After extensive negotiations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) yesterday agreed in principle to extend an emergency loan of \$9 billion. The conditions will almost certainly include high interest rates and a range of austerity measures to cut the budget.

The government has no resources to placate discontent in Balochistan or anywhere else in the country. Since coming to power nine months ago, it has already been forced to cut fuel subsidies and increase the prices of other essentials, slashing the living standards of the working class and rural poor. An explosive political situation is rapidly developing.

A number of major powers have announced that they will provide financial assistance to Pakistan in the wake of the earthquake. The amounts they are offering are tiny. China and the United States have so far given just one million dollars.

At the same time, to the east of Balochistan, Washington is spending billions to maintain the US occupation of Afghanistan and attack alleged insurgent safe havens in the tribal areas of north-west Pakistan. The Predator unmanned planes carrying out the attacks each cost over \$30 million. The latest US airstrikes inside the Pakistani agency of North Waziristan killed an estimated 32 people on Friday.



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