



U.S. Must Match Tsunami Relief Effort in Pakistan

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The United States reaped huge political benefits from its generous response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. But it's in danger of falling short now in strategically vital Pakistan....

A group critical of U.S. efforts, Terror Free Tomorrow, found that 71 percent of Americans believe they've heard less about the Pakistan quake than about the tsunami. When informed about the disaster, a majority favors more U.S. aid.

A widely publicized poll by TFT, whose advisory board includes Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and former Reps. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.) and Tom Foley (D-Wash.), found that tsunami relief cut Indonesian popular opposition to the U.S. war on terror from 72 percent to 36 percent and confidence in Osama bin Laden from 58 percent to 23 percent.

TFT's executive director, Ken Ballen, a former aide to Hamilton, told me "The United States is indeed helping Pakistan, but much more needs to be done, given the scale of the disaster and the strategic importance of the world's second-largest and only nuclear-armed Muslim nation."

Pakistan's president, Pervez Musharaf, has been a staunch U.S. ally in the war on terror and has been targeted repeatedly by Islamic radicals.

Ballen wrote in a paper on Pakistan that "the U.S. must now do nothing less than spearhead a response similar to the one that followed the tsunami — for self-evident and overwhelming humanitarian reasons and for the long-term national security of the United States itself."

Polls by the Pew Global Survey this year showed that 51 percent of Pakistanis have a favorable impression of bin Laden and only 23 percent are favorable toward the United States.

According to Ballen, "the humanitarian crisis in Pakistan is deepening, yet the world's response is not. For the tsunami, there were about 4,000 helicopters donated to ferry life-saving aid, and in Pakistan there are only 70 — even though there are almost three times as many people who need food and shelter to survive.

"Similarly," Ballen said, "80 percent of the [worldwide] aid that was pledged for the tsunami was given within the first two weeks, while Pakistan so far has received only about 12 percent of the aid pledged, or some \$17 million."

As both Hughes and Ballen told me, the tsunami and the Pakistani disaster present different aid challenges — and the situation in Pakistan is more daunting.

"The tsunami was a one-time event," Hughes observed. "A wave came in and swept all these people away" — an estimated 200,000 — "and there was very little need for ongoing disaster operations such as providing medical assistance and transports."

"In this case, we have a much more extensive ongoing operation ... in terms of delivering supplies, rescuing people and saving lives. It's very expensive, which is why we're launching the public-private partnership."

However, time is of the essence in Pakistan. An estimated 500,000 people are without shelter, and the fierce Himalayan winter is about to close in.

The United Nations appealed for \$550 million in international aid, but only \$131 million has been pledged, separate from the U.S. contribution. And the U.N.'s relief coordinator, Jan Egeland, said, "it's no good to pledge money for reconstruction if people die before you reconstruct."

A CARE International official told Newsday that "we can see a second crisis coming. Winter is on the way and the danger is that people will freeze to death."

To the extent that the United States and the rest of the world fall short in providing aid to Pakistan, Ballen said, the void will be filled by Muslim groups tied to al Qaeda.

Even Pakistani Interior Minister Aftab Khan Sherpao had to acknowledge that the radicals are now "the lifeline of our rescue and relief work," Ballen wrote.

Despite budgetary pressures and domestic disaster reconstruction expenses, he urged Congress to authorize Bush to spend "whatever sums are needed" for Pakistan relief and for the United States to "take the lead."

"If we are serious about truly confronting what President Bush rightly called 'the murderous ideology' of radical Islamists," he wrote, "then we must also take the concrete steps required to weaken support for the radicals among the people themselves."

The post-tsunami effort shows that we know how to do what's right. Now, we need to do it again.

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