

UNEDITED DRAFT

**Should international humanitarian actors care for political outcomes?
A case study of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan**

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Abstract

The challenge of delivering humanitarian relief to victims of natural disasters gets even more complicated in the context of states that are failing, going through civil wars or other forms of political conflict. International humanitarian intervention in such cases not only faces a different set of challenges in carrying out its tasks, but also has an effect on political and social outcomes in the post-disaster scenario. In recent cases of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan and the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, the disasters and the world's response to them transformed political equations.

This paper studies the responses of local and international actors in the wake of the Pakistan earthquake and contemplates a key policy dilemma: should international humanitarian actors be aware of and attempt to influence political outcomes. The scope of the paper is limited to the initial post-earthquake period (Oct 2005 to Feb 2006) in Pakistan. It argues that an international humanitarian framework that balances immediate relief with long-term political outcomes might address the dilemma.

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The Himalayas shook

It is reported that as the people of Muzaffarabad saw their capital crumbling in a matter of two minutes, many could not connect it to a quake. Instead, they thought that India had made a nuclear strike against the POK. It took them some time to realise that it was actually a quake. – B Raman¹

“The Pakistani Army is trained for any job that we are assigned—floods, elections, epidemics,” Major Ahmed told me. But, referring to the earthquake and its aftermath, he said, “It is the magnitude of a nuclear bomb.” – Steve Coll²

The earthquake that struck the Himalayan regions of Pakistan and India at 8:50am (Pakistan time) on 8th October 2005 eventually claimed over 86,000 lives and injured over 106,000 people across three countries—Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. The majority of the casualties were in Pakistan Administered Kashmir (PAK) and its North West Frontier Province (NWFP), where over 3.3 million people were rendered homeless. The earthquake’s epicenter was about 19 km North North East (NNE) of Muzaffarabad, the capital of PAK and measured 7.6 on the Richter scale.

Intimations. The earthquake was unprecedented in terms of the devastation it caused—flattening much of PAK, and slicing off mountains “as if with a giant axe”. Earthquakes had previously occurred in the Himalayan region in 1950³ and 1974⁴, this one was not entirely unexpected—by geologists, at least. Earlier in 2005, Nick Ambraseys and Roger Bilham, two of the world’s leading seismologists, had predicted that an earthquake of magnitude 8 or higher on the Richter scale was imminent (in geological terms) based on GPS measurements which indicated “that the average strain in the earth’s crust in the Himalayas is 18 inches per year, whilst the last several years of earthquake activity is estimated to have consumed about 5 inches per year, leaving a deficit that has to be released in future tremors.”⁵ Indeed, in 2002, large earthquakes in the Gilgit-Astore region north of Muzaffarabad had left about 16,000 people homeless.⁶

Democratic deficit. Until the October 2005 earthquake, though, contingency planning for seismic events was not a major policy priority for the Pakistani authorities at the federal or the PAK regional level. The military confrontation with India across the international border and the Line of Control (LOC); the proxy war in India’s Jammu & Kashmir state and internal security issues (pertaining to Sunni-Shia

¹ Raman, B. Oct 2005. Quake in Pakistan: Anger Against Musharraf, Paper No 1579, South Asia Analysis Group, <http://southasiaanalysis.org/papers/paper1579.html> accessed on 8 Feb 2008

² Coll, Steve. Fault Lines. *The New Yorker* (21st Nov 2005)

³ A double tragedy. *The Economist* (13th Oct 2005)

⁴ Hoodbhoy, Pervez. No Burial for Balakot. *Chowk.com* (13th Oct 2005). <http://www.chowk.com/articles/9823> accessed on 8 Feb 2008

⁵ Elnashai, Amr S. Nov 2006. The Pakistan Earthquake of October 2005: A Reminder of Human-Science Interaction in Natural Disasters Risk Management. *The Illinois International Review*

⁶ Preparing for the unknowable. *The Economist*. (13th Oct 2005)

sectarian tensions) in the Northern Areas (Gilgit and Baltistan) consumed the attention of policymakers in Islamabad. The unusual political structure of PAK—ostensibly free but lacking in popular representation to the degree enjoyed by Pakistan’s four provinces—ensured that questions of human development were subsumed under the security calculus of the Pakistani state, the guardian of which is the Pakistan Army.

Government’s response: military priorities

“I am the prime minister of a graveyard, surveying the ruined capital from a tent where I have slept since a weekend earthquake destroyed towns and villages” – Sikander Hayat Khan, Prime Minister of PAK⁷

Throughout the long journey [from Abbottabad in the NWFP to AJK’s capital Muzaffarabad], I saw soldiers lined up on both sides of the road, fully armed and in military fatigues. I stopped a few times and asked them to reach out to people in distress. They said they did not have orders from their superiors to do so. The response was more fitting for a military attack by an enemy force rather than that of a force of nature. – A local journalist in Abbottabad⁸

The earthquake caused landslides and avalanches that destroyed communications links and cut-off the affected regions from the rest of Pakistan. What little administrative capacity existed in the civilian government was either destroyed or could not be activated in its aftermath. Muzaffarabad, the administrative centre and the main city was among the worst affected—even the prime minister’s house was badly affected and he was reduced to living in a tent on his grounds.

In any case, the main state institution in the region was the Pakistan Army, deployed in large numbers in view of the border dispute with India. The earthquake, however, badly affected the Pakistan Army’s installations in the region. According to official estimates, it lost 450 of its personnel—including officers and commanders—and sustained 711 injuries. But observers believe that the actual toll may have been much higher, and these included wives and children of the military personnel killed as schools and living quarters collapsed⁹. The first reaction of the surviving members of the Army was to attempt to rescue their own colleagues¹⁰.

Securing the frontier. The Pakistan Army’s General Head Quarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi came to know of the extent of the devastation only around 3pm, almost 6 hours after the first shocks. Fearing that the Indian Army might take tactical advantage of the situation, its first reaction was to send two brigades¹¹ to reinforce Pakistani positions along the LOC. It is reported to have spent the first 24 hours on

⁷ I rule a graveyard, says Sikander. Daily Times, p 7. (11th Oct 2005)

⁸ Pakistan: Political Impact of the Earthquake. (March 2006). Asia Briefing No. 46, p 3. International Crisis Group.

⁹ Coll (2005)

¹⁰ Raman (2005)

¹¹ International Crisis Group (2006) p 3

military imperatives¹² following which it began its rescue effort. According to the International Crisis Group, its first response in many of the affected areas came 48 hours after the earthquake and almost 72 hours later in the worst affected areas. Given that the region includes pockets of population in remote areas that were cut off by the landslides following the earthquake, physical accessibility was a key problem.

The only means of accessing many of the affected people was by foot or helicopter. It was unable to use its surviving assets in the immediate aftermath towards this end. President General Musharraf turned down an offer of assistance—in the form of helicopters and joint search-and-rescue—from India citing “sensitivities”¹³.

Also, in early statements to the media, senior government officials played down the extent of the damage caused by the earthquake. The government established a Federal Relief Commission (FRC) a few days after the disaster struck. It followed this up with the Earthquake Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Authority (ERRA) tasked with supporting medium- to long-term rebuilding efforts.

Assessment. The Pakistan Army came in for widespread criticism for its ‘slow’ response. Various quarters, including Pakistan’s political opposition, the media, civil society and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) blamed the army for doing too little, too late on account of having the wrong priorities. Its dominance over most aspects of Pakistani society, General Musharraf’s projection of its superiority over other state institutions, its strong presence and logistical capabilities in the affected regions added stridence to the stream of criticism levelled at the Army.

In addition to the damage it incurred, the Army’s failure to respond immediately and adequately to the situation can be attributed to it being unequipped—doctrinally and operationally—to carry out humanitarian relief work on this scale. Lacking standard operating procedures, the Army would have to rely on specific instructions from its commanders. The breakdown of communications, though, meant that these were not forthcoming. As a result the ‘troops stationed in Kashmir reacted as if they were in a state of war, not faced with natural disaster’¹⁴.

In the event, General Musharraf blamed the critics as being “irresponsible” and a sign of “weakness and defeat”¹⁵. The criticism—especially in the context of the Pakistan Army’s failure towards the people of Kashmir—possibly resulted in greater determination to do improve its performance.

Jihadis to the rescue

“Bearded young men converged on towns close to the epicentre, after threading their shiny white mini-vans or military vehicles through boulder-strewn roads. More trekked by foot across rockslides, carrying picks and shovels. Yahya Mujahid, a Muslim militant chief, said he ordered his

¹² Raman (2005)

¹³ Khan, Aamer Ahmed. Opening up Kashmir. BBC World Online. (19th Oct 2005) http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4357006.stm accessed on 8 Feb 2008

¹⁴ International Crisis Group (2006), p 3

¹⁵ Coll (2005)

guerrillas to put aside their Kalashnikov rifles and hired 100 mules so they could get relief supplies up to the heights and carry out the injured.” – Jan McGirk¹⁶

“...jihadi and Islamist organisations were also prominent in camp management, running 37 out of the 73 organised camps in and around Pakistani-administered Kashmir’s capital, Muzaffarabad. These groups had a presence in every affected district of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) in the Neelum and Jehlum valleys, including Muzaffarabad, Bagh, Hattian, Dhir Kot, Rawalakot, Haveli and Athmuqam.” – Jawad Hussain Qureshi¹⁷

Other than the Army, the only other actors in the affected regions that had institutional capacity to conduct rescue, relief and subsequently rehabilitation work were the Islamist ‘charities’ and jihadi groups¹⁸. Indeed, these had long operated as an extension of the Pakistan Army in its proxy war against India. Despite initial reports¹⁹ suggesting that the training camps and infrastructure of jihadi organisations suffered considerable damage, they were among the first on the scene in many affected areas. The logistics and supply infrastructure they had created for the war against Indian troops in Kashmir was redirected for humanitarian works.

Banned and helpful. In both PAK and NWFP, organisations like the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (associated with the banned terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba) and the Jaish-e-Mohammed were at the forefront of the rescue and relief operations: conducting operations as diverse as digging through the debris by hand, to delivering food and clothing by foot, to setting up and managing camps of displaced persons and running field hospitals. These groups also received considerable material, financial and logistical support from the Pakistan Army. According to the Crisis Group at least 17 radical Islamist organisations took part in the disaster relief work—their being ‘banned’ hardly coming in the way.

Assessment. The Islamist groups distinguished themselves by being the most effective actors in the aftermath of the disaster. Despite their proscription on account of their involvement in terrorist activities, their role was hailed by the public, by media commentators and by General Musharraf himself. A large part of this was due to their close ties to the Pakistan Army, which used them as its own extension. This gave them deep local knowledge and access to the Army’s infrastructure—including, for instance its helicopters and stores. In fact, the Pakistan Army continued its

¹⁶ McGirk, Jan. Kashmir: the politics of an earthquake. openDemocracy (18th Oct 2005). http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-india_pakistan/jihadi_2941.jsp accessed on 8th Feb 2008.

¹⁷ Qureshi, Jawad Hussain. Earthquake Jihad: The Role of Jihadis and Islamist Groups after the October 2005 Earthquake. Humanitarian Practice Network. International Crisis Group. (24th July 2006). <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4270> accessed on 8th Feb 2008

¹⁸ Koelbl, Susanne. Muhammad’s Silent Army: Islamist Extremists Gain Upper Hand in Kashmir Relief Efforts. Der Spiegel. (25th Feb 2006). <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,403726,00.html> accessed 8th Feb 2008

¹⁹ Bedi, Rahul. Militants’ training camps wiped out. The Telegraph. (10th Oct 2005). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/10/10/wquake310.xml&sSheet=/news/2005/10/10/ixnewstop.html> accessed on 8th Feb 2008.

cooperation with these groups even at the cost of marginalising 'mainstream' NGOs like the Edhi Foundation, the country's largest humanitarian service organisation.

The emergence, or perhaps, the positioning, of the Islamist organisations as the most effective actors was to have major consequences as the international humanitarian response kicked in.

The world comes to help

At Musharraf's invitation, soldiers and relief workers from European and NATO countries have also come to Azad Kashmir. Two months earlier, the region was a closed security zone, to which foreigners typically could not travel without an escort and a special permit. Now small crowds of local men gathered to watch with apparent admiration as female European soldiers shopped in their food stalls. Pakistan has unsuccessfully sought to turn the conflict into an international matter, with the United States and European powers directly involved, and helping to push for a settlement; at least temporarily, the outside world, thanks to the earthquake, has finally come to Kashmir. – Steve Coll²⁰

"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....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, – Pervez Hoodbhoy²¹

"This was a very successful day for Pakistan," Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, after the international community pledged more than US\$5.8 billion for reconstruction.

International humanitarian relief operations commenced as soon as the Pakistani government called for help on 11th October 2005. A range of actors—from US and NATO troops operating in nearby Afghanistan, the UN agencies, the ICRC and teams from various countries joined the relief effort. While Pakistan declined help from Indian Air Force helicopter units, it accepted 1300 tonnes of relief materials (delivered by two trains, one aircraft and 45 trucks) from the Indian government.²² Over 7000 relief workers from various international governments and aid organisations participated in the relief work.

²⁰ Coll (2006)

²¹ Hoodbhoy (2005)

²² Official spokesman, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, (17th Nov 2005). http://www.indianembassy.org/press_release/2005/Nov/16.htm accessed on 8th Feb 2008.

After an initial reticence—blamed on ‘donor fatigue’²³ and the perception created by Pakistan’s high-profile arms purchases days after the earthquake—the international community eventually pledged more than the government’s financing target²⁴. General Musharraf promised unprecedented transparency in accounting for the aid, and responded to criticism by delaying the purchase of F-16 fighters²⁵. The ERRA—staffed by military officers—was put in charge of coordinating relief and reconstruction efforts.

Assessment. Most international organisations that arrived on the scene established working relationships with the jihadi outfits operating there. For instance, American aid was distributed by the Jamaat-ud-Dawa. It also worked with the ICRC, WHO, UNICEF, WFP, UNHCR, several governments and NGOs²⁶. Many organisations unfamiliar with local conditions and unequipped to handle relief activities themselves found it convenient to deliver material to the local ‘partners’, without looking too deeply into their other activities. Moreover, the immediate challenge was to protect the population from the elements ahead of the onset of the Himalayan winter. Most international organisations, therefore, took the pragmatic route of dealing with whoever appeared to be capable of the job. Critics allege that such an approach that mainstream organisations like the Edhi Foundation were similarly capable but were ignored²⁷.

Political outcomes

First, the responses of the government, non-state actors, the media, civil society groups and the international community bolstered the capabilities of the radical Islamist organisations in the affected areas and their strengthened their legitimacy. Second, the responses allowed the Pakistan Army to further marginalise civilian political and bureaucratic institutions.

Jihadi groups ‘legitimised’. By setting up and managing the tent cities these organisations these organisations became legitimate players in the governance of the reconstructed settlements. In time to come, they would find it easier to impose their version of social mores on society. By starting madrassas in place of the destroyed government schools, they injected their radical Islamist curriculum, again strengthening their hold over society. The Deobandi establishment plans to construct 1500 madrassas in PAK and 300 in NWFP²⁸. By taking orphaned children under their

²³ Inderfurth, Karl F, David Fabrycky & Stephen P Cohen. Save Pakistan from ‘donor fatigue’. Christian Science Monitor. (17th Nov 2005) <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1117/p09s01-coop.html> accessed on 8th Feb 2008.

²⁴ Sengupta, Somini and David Rohde. Pledges topgoal set for quake aid. International Herald Tribune. (21 Nov 2005). <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2005/11/20/news/quake.php> accessed on 8th Feb 2008.

²⁵ Masood, Salman. Focusing on Quake Aid, Pakistan Delays F-16 Purchase. New York Times. (5th Nov 2005). <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/05/international/asia/05pakistan.html> accessed on 8th Feb 2008.

²⁶ Qureshi (2006)

²⁷ International Crisis Group (2006)

²⁸ Qureshi (2006)

wing they acquired potential recruits for their radical agenda. They provided psychological and moral support during a time of trauma, but content of which might have only radicalised an already conservative population. Most importantly they understood the opportunity the disaster presented them in terms of widening their popular appeal. By end 2005, large number of PAK citizens were under the *de facto* administration of radical Islamist organisations.

While radical Islamist political parties have never been popular among the masses—garnering a small share of the popular vote—even in PAK, after the crisis, their popularity soared. Given that the July 2006 PAK assembly polls were rigged by the Pakistan Army to produce a pro-Musharraf result, it is difficult to estimate the extent of their popularity among the population. Be that as it may, allowing the Islamists to make greater inroads into a population around an area where Osama Bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders are supposedly hiding is a poor result for the international community. Moreover jihadi groups may have used some of the funds collected for earthquake relief to conduct international terrorist operations.²⁹

Entrenched military rule. The involvement in reconstruction of the Army on the one hand and the radical Islamists on the other completely sidelined the revival of other political institutions in PAK. The ERRA and its local counterparts are extensively staffed by military officers³⁰. Serving and retired officers have also been appointed to positions in the PAK government. Even in NWFP, military commanders were the real decision makers, sidelining the district coordination committees and the *nazims* (local administrators). The systematic sidelining of civilian administrators not only affected aid distribution but also strengthened the hold of the Army over governance. The implications of this for democratic revival apart, the Army's actions—and the international community's acquiescence—put it directly in charge of the finances of reconstruction. While the ERRA's website provides relatively more details³¹ compared to other Pakistani government departments, there is little explanation on how a significant amount of the money has been spent³².

The primary implication of the post-disaster events is that the prospect of a secular democratic polity has become all the more distant. The international humanitarian response bears its share of responsibility for this. The pertinent question for disaster policy is: should this matter?

Only relief matters. If the humanitarian intervention is interpreted narrowly—say for rescue and relief—then it is reasonable to argue that it does not matter who does the helping as long as the help is effective. For instance, stemming from its tradition of strict neutrality amid belligerents, the ICRC (International Red Cross/Red Crescent) takes this position.

²⁹ Partlow, Joshua and Kamran Khan. Charity Funds Said to Provide Clues to Alleged Terrorist Plot. Washington Post. (15th Aug 2006). <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/14/AR2006081401196.html> accessed on 8th Feb 2008.

³⁰ PPP calls for civilian role in ERRA. Dawn. (27th Oct 2005). <http://www.dawn.com/2005/10/27/nat20.htm> accessed on 8th Feb 2008

³¹ Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA) website <http://www.erra.gov.pk>

³² Zaidi, Sarah. Transparency without disclosure. The Friday Times. (Oct 19–25, 2007)

But there's life beyond disaster. It is, however, less reasonable to argue against exercising discrimination in the partners for medium- to long-term reconstruction, as this is almost certainly linked to social and political outcomes. Exercising value judgement becomes necessary. But it is neither easy to demarcate relief from reconstruction nor possible to cut off organisations that participated in relief from going on to the reconstruction phase. Working backwards then, it stands to reason that choosing the right partner at the outset is important. The Crisis Group, for instance, advocates that international actors must “work with secular humanitarian partners”, “provide local communities with a role in decision-making”, and “empower elected officials and institutions”³³.

Policy dilemma. But such a policy is fraught with moral and practical challenges: especially in circumstances—like post-earthquake PAK or post-tsunami Jaffna (Sri Lanka) and Aceh (Indonesia)—where non-state actors were arguably the most effective organisations. Should international actors refuse to co-operate with such organisations, even if this means blunting the humanitarian response? Alternately, can the international community escape the moral (and geo-political) consequences of rendering terrorist and radical regimes legitimate in disaster affected regions?

Conclusion

Towards a politically aware intervention. A practical way to address this quandary is to evolve international consensus on responsibility for political outcomes. Purely humanitarian organisations (like the ICRC) could take a value-neutral approach towards short-term rescue and relief. Their intervention policies should be made transparent to their donors, recipients and the international community. On the other hand, governments and government-linked organisations (like USAID) could be more discriminating in their partnerships and attach conditions to bring about desired political outcomes. This means that different governments could choose their local partners and strategy according to their own values and interests. An international humanitarian co-ordination agency, under UN auspices, could co-ordinate between the two different types of responses.

Post-disaster events in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Indonesia call for an international humanitarian response framework that balances immediate relief with long-term political outcomes. Even as the moves towards this, individual international actors would do well to define whether or not their mission includes responsibility for political outcomes. Ambiguity will almost certainly lead to outcomes as in Pakistan, where the strengthening of the military-mullah nexus contributed in no small part towards deepening that country's political crisis and worsening regional and international security.

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³³ International Crisis Group (2006)