

Pakistan A Year After The Quake: Successes and Disappointments

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A year after the catastrophic earthquake in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and the northern parts of Pakistan, the story of rebuilding lives of quake-stricken people presents a mix of successes and disappointments. Thousands of survivors have found ways to start their life afresh but there are still thousand others who face an uncertain future.

The October 8 earthquake was the bloodiest in the country's history and killed an estimated 73,000 people other than reducing an area of 30,000 square kilometres to rubble within seconds.

The government claims to have provided "adequate shelter" to almost 95 per cent of the 3.5 million people who lost everything in the decimating earthquake. With the help of the government, an estimated 25% of the affected households have started reconstruction.

But independent surveys and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) estimate that still a larger part of the affected population is displaced and face another harsh Himalayan winter out in the open.

"Our findings are alarming. Too many earthquake survivors are facing another winter without basic services and adequate shelter," said a report of Fritz Institute – a California-based non-profit body which specializes in improving global disaster relief operations. Another leading world NGO, Oxfam, estimates some 1.8 million people will have to spend the fast approaching winter in make-shift tents.

President Pervez Musharraf, however, hit back at these figures at a conference held on October 5 in Islamabad to review the progress of development activities in the quake-ravaged areas. Citing statistics calculated by the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA), the body he had formed after the earthquake, the President said that only five per cent of the 3.5 million displaced populations were living in tents.

Success story

Response of the global community to the October 8 tragedy was overwhelming and absolute. Relief goods were flown into Pakistan from all parts of the world. Friends and foes joined hands to save the lives of thousands of people stranded in the rugged mountains and to provide them with the basic needs of life. Otherwise who could have dreamt of Iranian aid workers unloading relief goods from American C-130s?

An international donors' conference last year pledged over 6.5 billion US dollars to help Pakistan in the reconstruction and rehabilitation phase that is likely to stretch up to five years.

Giving details of the progress in the first year to the representatives of the donors' community at the October 5 Review Conference, ERRA Chief Altaf Saleem said that damage assessment has been done and seismic zoning and fault-line mapping completed to start reconstruction of destroyed cities in Kashmir and quake-hit parts of North-Western Frontier Province (NWFP).



The government strategy to provide cash grants for sustaining households and house building has proved successful in helping people return to normal life. The government has already released Rs. 29.82 billion (approx 500 million US dollars) to 422,777 people to help build their houses.

An area has been identified to relocate Balakot city which had been completely destroyed by the earthquake. Similarly master plans have been approved for Muzaffarabad – capital of Pakistani Kashmir – and two districts of Bagh and Rawalakot to build them on modern lines through proper town planning.

In the education sector, all educational facilities have been made functional through the provision of interim structures like pre-fabricated buildings and large weather-proof tents. Out of 6,298 destroyed facilities, 25% - 1,574 facilities - are earmarked for reconstruction during 2006-7.

All health facilities have been made functional through provision of interim pre-fabricated structures. These are further supported by emergency hospitals established by various interna-

tional and national organizations. Under a comprehensive health sector strategy, 342 health care facilities are to be rebuilt, out of which 139 are slated for reconstruction during 2006-7. All these facilities have been picked by various donors and sponsors.

Disappointments

But not everything is going as smoothly as it appears. As indicated by the independent NGOs, there are thousands of survivors who still need assistance in the areas of food, shelter and livelihood.

The Fritz Institute Survey put the number of displaced persons at 60 percent of the total survivors, which is close to what Oxfam's estimate (1.8 million people). People are also complaining about lack of transparency in provision of aid and livelihood cash grants. President Musharraf admitted to "instances of corruption" at the lower level but believed that the system put in place to provide cash

assistance was mostly transparent.

A more common complaint has been the minimum consultation with the affected people in the rehabilitation efforts. "My collapsed house is here and I have restarted my shop near my home but the officials are sending us to a tent village much farther away," Khalid Mehmood, a resident of a tent village in Jalalabad told a local English daily.

Like Mehmood, there are many others who complain that they had no say in the decision-making processes related to re-location, livelihood and education and health-care facilities.

"Even a year after the earthquake, it is surprising that the overwhelming majority of aid recipients in our survey reported not being consulted," said Dr. Anisya Thomas, Managing Director of Fritz Institute.

A better future promised

President Musharraf has promised to

turn the challenge, posed by the earthquake, into an opportunity by providing better life, living standard and facilities to the people of quake-ravaged Kashmir and the NWFP.

While the reconstruction efforts are estimated to take five years, Musharraf assured the donors' review conference that 80 percent of the construction would be completed in three years – by 2009. He also set December 2008 as the target to complete the construction of housing units for the survivors which, he added, was the main issue for the sustenance of the survivors.

The President, however, appealed to the donors for another 800 million US dollars to foot the bill of constructing additional houses and education and healthcare facilities in excess of earlier estimates.