

Editorial

## Our “Jihadi” Image in the Quake-Hit Areas

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According to reports, Western relief agencies, including those run by the United Nations and the United States government, have complained of “perceptible harassment by ‘Jihadi elements’ working in the quake hit-areas in Azad Kashmir and the NWFP”. There are some 20,000 workers belonging to religious and jihadi NGOs carrying out relief activities there, led by the most notorious “renamed” Lashkar-e-Tayba. A statement to this effect was made by Hansjoerg Strohmeyer, chief of the Office of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, UN, at an Asia Society function in New York recently. The UN official was worried about the safety of Western relief workers at the hands of workers from religious organisations. The report further indicates that if foreign relief agencies faced actual violence, they might pack up and leave.

This was preceded by a statement by the US ambassador to Pakistan, Ryan C Crocker, calling upon the government to monitor and, if necessary, stop some jihadi organisations from continuing with their relief work. From the Pakistani side there have been reassurances only. It has been stated that Pakistan’s “biggest relief agency working in the area, the army, has made it absolutely clear to all the religious NGOs that any political attempt to muddy the waters in Azad Kashmir, let alone provoke violence, by the religious groups would lead to swift reprisals from the state”. It has also been conceded in official circles that “any violence in the relief areas would be cataclysmic for Pakistan in so many ways and will not be tolerated”. A pledge has been given that no foreign agency would be harassed by the jihadis. The truth is that the first complaint about harassment has already been made, although perhaps not directly to the government of Pakistan.

Needless to say, the religious NGOs led by Lashkar-e-Tayba (now Jamaat ud Da’wa) deny that there is any tension between them and the foreigners. (Anyone who reads the almost daily poison being spewed by the leaders of some of these organisations about President Pervez Musharraf being “a slave of the United States” will find it difficult to believe this.) Sources in the religious groups do admit that there is some presence of workers from several banned organisations like Hizb ul Mujahideen and others in the area. Al Badr - known to be the richest among the militias - is there in strength in the NWFP part of the calamity-hit area. This outfit was for a long time under the wing of our intelligence agencies after being weaned away from the Jamaat-e-Islami and has been allowed a lot of influence in the Mansehra region. There is Hizb ul Mujahideen, too, which used to be an adjunct of the same religious party once upon a time. But the one big jihadi organisation

that the army has allowed into the field remains the Jamaat ud Da'wa with 3,000 workers running 12 tent cities and four field hospitals mainly in AJK.

The Jamaat-e-Islami has its own outfit in the field, too, under the name of Al Khidmet Foundation, deploying 12,000 workers. It denies any friction with Western agencies, although it has had a dangerous confrontation with the relief groups run by the MQM in the AJK area, a kind of extension of the battle that the two groups fought earlier in Karachi. The aggression of the accused party is hardly concealed. A spokesman of Al Khidmet has said that the Western-UN reaction to its presence in the field was a sign of a "mean mentality" - hardly a thing to say to foreigners who have come far afield to help us. The spokesman made it clear that if an effort is made to remove Al Khidmet from the area "we will strongly resist" it.

Pakistan's bad image is getting in the way once again. That the jihadis are "waiting in the wings" has become clear to everyone in the world. Their ability to operate freely in the affected regions has emerged as bad PR at a time when Pakistan needed the image of a helpless victim. (Perhaps it was not possible in the first place to restrain the jihadi outfits in areas where they had been allowed a free run for many years.) But we could be approaching a point where bad PR might turn some of the donors away. Indeed, many in Pakistan's opposition circles are already predicting that the Western world will not deliver on its pledges to give money to Pakistan's quake disaster. Is it possible that the delay in the fulfilment of these pledges could be attributed to the jihadis enhancing their image at the cost of the image of the country? It goes without saying that should the Foreign Office start receiving expressions of polite reservation from the West, it would be hard put to play on the front foot.

Ominously, Barbara Stocking, the executive director of Oxfam, has said in Islamabad that "thousands of people are helpless in mountainous regions and the international community has still not responded with urgently needed resources". Given this "go-slow", Islamabad has to guard against some of the stereotypical reactions against "foreigners" noted in calamity-hit areas elsewhere in the Third World. Some of it has surfaced in Indonesia in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami and has definitely hampered relief and reconstruction. Unable to repress fear and loathing of the "foreigner" winning the gratitude of the local population, the Jakarta government has ordered away the NGOs from Banda Aceh and its intelligence agencies, representing a paranoid pathology, have played their role in arousing this reaction. Unlike Indonesia Pakistan has still to receive the funds on the basis of which it has announced its ambitious reconstruction plan. Therefore something must be done urgently to prevent the religious and jihadi elements (around 20,000) from coming face to face with the Western NGOs that they have been taught in the past to hate. \*

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