

17 days after the earthquake

Not even 5 percent of aid received!

Wednesday 26 October 2005, by [TARIQ Farooq](#) (Date first published: 26 October 2005).

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Even after 17 days of the most disastrous earth quake in Pakistan, there are areas where no one has yet reached to help the victims. That is mainly true of the Neelum Valley area, close to the so-called Line Of Control that separate Kashmir into Indian and Pakistan held areas. Only helicopters are able to reach the area. The military is the only institution that controls all the helicopters. They simply they do not have the helicopters required to bring the relief to all the devastating villages.

A two member team from one private TV channels GEO accompanying the military relief helicopter Neelum Valley showed the glimpse of the plight of the villagers last night on 25th October 2005. The villagers were begging, arguing, fighting, accusing and saying what ever they could say to the military officers to get some immediate relief to save the lives of their children who are not yet dead. One villager said, "17 days gone, we have no team reaching to our village. We have buried 80 from our village, many more are injured, but no help yet is reached the village".

The so-called LOC is closed by Indian and Pakistani governments and no one from any country can cross the Line. If the LOC would have been open, it would have taken few hours for the Indian held Kashmir people to bring the relief. Pakistani government finally has suggested last week of opening the Line from 5 different areas. But technical side had to be discussed by the Indian government to agree to the proposal. It is not yet been opened.

Earlier, Pakistani military government rejected an offer of the Indian government of the Indian helicopters for the relief purposes. „It was not in our national interest to accept this offer, it raises the security of the country% said one Pakistani spokesperson while rejecting the offer. Later Pakistani military regime offered to accept the Indian helicopters without Indian pilots. What more security is in the mind of the Pakistani government while, according to the latest official figures, over 53000 are confirmed death after the 8th October earthquake. Unofficial figures for the death toll are over 100,000 and more seriously injured.

Pathetic response

There has been a pathetic aid response by the governments of the advance countries so far. Not even five percent of the total needed for the relief and rehabilitation work has been pledged or sent to Pakistan. The "friends" of general Musharaf have not been pushed properly by the military government to donate and come for help in this grave situation. The reason is very simple.

The military government earlier response was to hide the facts. They tried in the initial period to show the minimum losses of lives and property. I heard the core commander of the North West Frontier Province, the real boss of the province, on 9th October, a day after the earth quake “it is the politicians who are making noise of more deaths and losses, I have been touring around the whole day, the maximum deaths are less than one thousand”. This is a province where there are more than 20,000 confirmed deaths according to the official figures.

OXFAM UK issued a serious warning on 26th October that Pakistan has been abandoned by the industrial states. It noted that America, Japan, Germany and Italy have donated which is not matching their financial positions. While France, Belgium, Austria and Finland announced no donations at all.

The United Nation asked 300 million dollars in emergency relief but only one third of that has materialized. The UN economic coordinator for immediate relief in Pakistan Mr. Rashid Kalkof told the news reporters in Islamabad on 23rd October that we did not expect the disaster on that high level. It went beyond our imaginations. That is why there was a delay in the initial relief activities. He said according to our initial estimation, over three million people have suffered from this catastrophe.

On 22nd October, the prime minister of Azad Kashmir (the Pakistani occupied Kashmir) said, “do not wait for the death of the Kashmiries, send the helicopters now. The world community should not talk but act. The whole world has not been able to send the immediate required 200,000 tents yet, what is the use of helicopters when Kashmiries are dead”. The desperation of the hand picked prime minister of Azad Kashmir shows the real danger that is erupting to the lives of the effectees who are desperate to get the tents before the arrival of the winter in three weeks times. Already in some areas, snow is pouring down and other areas, the weather is around zero point.

At present, there a total of 46 helicopters helping in the relief efforts, some 30 of them are from US army. According to a BBC report on 23rd October, half of the helicopters are involved in VIP activities. That mean transportation of the very important personalities or on security of these VIP's.

Even General Musharaf has to admit on 21st October that only 620 million dollars is been pledged which is very little. According to the government surveys, the total damage may accede five billion dollars. The independent surveys bring the total damage to 10 billion dollars.

The World Food Programme appeal for 56 million dollars is met with only 10 per cent success so far. They have been issuing serious warning of more deaths if the international response to this disaster is not according to the needs of the time.

Militarization of the relief efforts

All the action of the Musharaf regime shows the growing militarization of the relief efforts. The military want to control all the incoming aid and want to distribute without the inclusion of the civilians. A major general Farooq Ahmed is appointed as the relief commissioner. Another general is appointed for the rehabilitation work. The civilians seem totally outside the network of the official channels of relief and rehabilitation work.

The total incapacity of the military regime to provide any effective help in the first three days of the earthquake is now been compensated by the mainstream media,s publicity of the army as the only savoir. Even the main private TV channels are promoting the army relief efforts as the only way forward. During the six years of military rule, most of civilian institutions are headed by the army

retired or serving officers. Now the relief and rehabilitation work has joined the same route.

The earth quack has raised the issues like occupation of Kashmir by Pakistan and India and its effect on the people. It has raised the issue of the priorities of the Pakistani state which has been too busy in arming itself while totally neglecting the defense of the civilian in any disaster like this one.

The natural disaster has not been met with the preparations that were needed. The total loss would have been reduced to a large extent if the state would have prepared for such incidents. But the social priorities for the people are the last words in the dictionary of the ruling classes of Pakistan.

Cancellation of the debts campaign

The national assembly of Pakistan has passed a resolution that the debts of the people in the effected area should be cancelled. So was the demand of the members of the NWFP assembly. This is related to the demand of Labour Party Pakistan to cancel the unjust debts of Pakistan. Pakistan owes 34 billion dollars in foreign loans. It pays nearly 5 billion dollars annually in the repayments of the debts. This is the largest part of the national budget. If the repayment of only year's debt will not be paid, it can compensate the total damage according to the official figures. The irony of the matter is that IMF has announced, not an aid, but a loan on soft terms basis even on this tragic occasion for Pakistan.

The people's response

There has been unprecedented people,s response not only in Pakistan but internationally, particularly in those countries which have large Pakistani immigrant population. According to one survey, over 10 billion rupees (200 million US Dollars) donations have been sent to the effected areas by the people of Pakistan. Labour Relief Campaign in its first four days of camping in Lahore raised over 250000 Rupees in cash and over 2 million Rupees worth of goods from ordinary passer byes. So has been the case of many more relief camps which emerged in every party of Pakistan. There have been the cases all over Kashmir and NWFP effect areas where the first aid came form the people and not from the sate.

What is to be done?

The social movement internationally should take the question of earth quake on urgent basis. It should urge the governments in the advance countries to do more what they have done so far. It has to take the question to the labor movement and to help the Kashmir and Pakistani workers and peasants who have lost every thing. The response has to come on urgent basis. More effective measures has to be taken to collect funds for the effectees not only for the immediate relief but also for the rehabilitation work.

Please visit Labour Education Foundation website for more details of Labour Relief Campaign www.lef.org.pk

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