

No end to quake victims' pain

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AS WE approach the two-year anniversary of the Oct 8, 2005, earthquake, it is important to take stock and raise some questions about the progress made on reconstruction efforts and how effectively the foreign aid/loans have been utilised. It is unfortunate that charges of corruption in the public and private sector remain. Take, for instance, a report on Sunday about allegations of misappropriation of funds in Muzaffarabad. The AJK government has finally taken note of the allegations (first made in April) against a high official at the AJK chamber of commerce who is charged with misappropriating Rs50m given to him by a Saudi NGO for distribution among earthquake victims. Of the 635 people to have received the Saudi funds last year — that works out to Rs86,410 per person — around 80 per cent are said to belong to the official's tribe. The inquiry must ascertain what the selection criterion was. If women who are claiming to be widows when their husbands are alive did indeed receive funds, then it is a clear case of misappropriation. It is especially important to get to the bottom of this so that no NGO or individual feels that its funds will not reach the deserving.

The sad reality is that there have been many scams since the earthquake occurred and a lot of people have gotten away with their crimes. This makes it necessary to punish culprits involved in wrongdoings as it will restore the people's faith in the rehabilitation and reconstruction process which has been dampened. There can be no denying the fact that the compensation aspect has been badly handled — victims have been complaining of not receiving the promised amount whereas others have received more than was due to them. The discrepancies have been widely reported and thus require thorough investigation. Erra, on its part, has had all sorts of charges levelled against it, like the high expenditures it incurs on administrative costs or that its housing and education projects have yet to take off or — the popular theory — that it is not a transparent organisation. All these allegations need to be addressed by Erra as they may be undeserved. Most important though, Erra must speed up the rehabilitation process, especially in the housing and education sector where work seems to be progressing at a snail's pace. It must also put in place a monitoring system ensuring that no NGO is making a profit from the people's pain.

P.S.

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