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Islamabad and Allies Must Win Hearts and Minds of Flood Victims with Humane Aid Delivery

LSE Ideas

By Faheem Haider

Even though the flood water is receding from Southern parts of Pakistan, the majority poor in Pakistan, in the North and elsewhere, are still suffering from the month long flood's devastation. To redress this situation and to play the offensive strategically, the United States has pushed through a large aid package designed to re-acquaint the mostly poor people of Pakistani to the idea that the U.S. is out for something other than its immediate short-term interests. That narrative—the U.S. is Pakistan's partner in its social and economic developmental goals— now seems to have been undercut by video-images that show inadequate, incompetent aid delivery and the unruly, violent fights that seem to spontaneously burst in flames in over-populated, shoddily built relief camps each time an aid delivery goes awry. These images register a violent state of nature, where animalistic dominance prevails over long-observed culturally sensitive tribal honor. The losers of these vicious fights ramble away, their dignity lost.

Contrast that picture with smoothly moving food queues in relief shelters set up by humanitarian organizations affiliated with banned organizations like Lashkar-e-Taiba. Each man is fed and his family is given an adequate share of food, shelter, clothing and medicine, sometimes all at once. If the logistics of government and Western aid delivery continue to trivialize the victims' long held sense of dignity, the U.S. and its allies will lose the fight for the hearts and minds of the Pakistani people as they try to rout Islamist militancy in Pakistan.

There is an immediate and urgent need for government and international aid. More than one third of the country is under water. 1500 and more dead, but nearly 20 million flood survivors (in a population of 170 million) stand on the edge of a catastrophe more devastating than the one they have slipped past. The United Nations and other NGO's have been sounding the alert on the possibility of a rapidly deteriorating disease-led public health crisis that could claim tens of thousands more lives. Food is far more than scarce. Fresh water is a fiercely guarded find, amidst the flood submerged hills and valleys.

The government and allied aid disbursement programs are already laudable, though already inefficient and inadequate. Nevertheless, it seems despite the aid offered, the dignity of the proud, predominantly tribal victims of Pakistan's flood has become another casualty of the devastation.

"We are not animals, this is not feeding time at the zoo. We are humans, yet the police beat us, they throw food at us. We are not animals," sputtered a man to an Al Jazeera correspondent, recently. The logistical requirements of aid dispersion has required difficult allocational choices on an industrial level and police patrolling that has seemed to dehumanize the people's just and immediate needs. Aid groups sometimes deliver medicine, sometimes food, sometimes water. It seems these goods are never provided at the same time, in sufficient numbers, to enough people.

Islamabad and its allies must rectify just this idea of slighted dignity if they wish to achieve modest victory for the U.S allied intervention against Islamists. Rectifying this widely held claim of dignity is important because it plays into an off-putting narrative that has already defined the U.S. allied relationship with Pakistan and its people. Roughly it is this: the U.S. funded internal coups, maintained military dictators in power and bolstered radical militant groups when it suited American short-term interests. As soon as funding U.S. short-term interests drew immediate results, the U.S. left Pakistan to its own devices. The Pakistani governments that remained after U.S. aid was withdrawn have not benefited the people. The U.S. involvement in Pakistan therefore has not benefited the people of Pakistan. Something like this must stand behind the Pew Research poll that shows only 17% of Pakistanis have a favorable view of the United States.

Pakistan is in the worst shape it has been since the 1947 partition. The broadening inequality between the have and have-nots has now yawned gapingly to the distance between the haves and the have-nothings. (The recent charges that landowners have diverted floodwaters away from their property into poorer neighboring farms have not helped.) The macro-economy has all but collapsed. Rolling blackouts have decimated domestic and export manufacturing in the country. The U.S. and its allies

have been playing for time by throwing money at the elite political echelon. However, Islamist groups like the Tehrik-e-Taliban's newly energetic recruitment base is just those newly categorized have-nothings. As the flood rages and the government response remains mired in understandable but inexcusable incompetence, the have nothings will remain simmering in their disgust at politics as usual in Pakistan. All those people will move toward the Islamists as they intervene into the lives of the flood victims in a humane and sensitive way, shoring up their bellies and their dignity.

Now, there's plenty of pain to go around. In many ways, the rich and the poor are suffering this crisis together. Due to the flood Pakistan's infrastructure has eroded back 20, 30 years, affecting rich and poor alike. Public utilities have been destroyed and collective and individual capabilities have been degraded to a formidable degree. Schools have been shut in order to make room for the healthcare needs of the flood survivors. It will take a generation to bring Pakistan back to its starting ground, the position it occupied in whatever index, whatever place in some NGO list it held, even one day before the flood started to take its toll. So it is amazing that the government can deliver food and medicine at all throughout this large and rough country. However, the government moves are still not enough to register support amongst the flood victims, a large share of whom have been left to their own devices and who have found help from Islamist relief organizations.

It seems no one in Islamabad has come up with a way to drive home the point that the have-nothings in Pakistan are not alone in their misery; that Islamabad and the U.S care about their well-being. The government needs to demonstrate that it accords value to the dignity of these suffering people, during this time, this monsoon season, on this month of Ramadan. However, instead of ameliorating the suffering of the predominantly poor victims of the flood, the means by which aid has been delivered to them only reinforces the disjunct in dignity between the government aid delivery teams and all those hungry men and children, who stretch out their arms, supplicant and angry.

Contrast that with the images of Islamist organizations like Jamaat-ud Dawa, that a month into the flood, still supplies home made iftar meals to flood victims in pockets of Pakistan like Nowshera in the Northwest. Consider the orderly lines, as people are greeted, "Assalamu alaikum" in sonorous tones. "Kaisey heh aap" –how are you?" A quick set up and the men, women and children pass along the queue. Indeed, contrary to the assertions of the Zardari government that the Islamist's ability to deliver aid is waning, these groups have sprung up all through the countryside and claim to have delivered aid to more than 400,000 victims and have more volunteers and donors than the government has been able to muster.

Whatever the provenance of funding of these groups, the victims of the flood walk away with their dignity, plate of food and medicine in hand. They have no need to fight for their food and water. Their honor is left intact. Throw me food from above as one might to a dog and, in time, might I not think myself a dog? The imam scooping rice onto my plate, his hand on mine, who later lays out all the ways that Zardari and his American funders stand against me, will likely win my support in the months to come. It is through the immediate and humane manner of addressing their nearly captured interlocutors that Islamist organizations will likely recruit new adherents. It is this calculated game that the West is losing.

It is this on-going public relations disaster that will likely stymie U.S and its allied moves to rout Islamists like Tehrik e-Taliban and Lashkar- e -Taiba. These organizations are multiplying in number in the hearts and minds of Pakistan's flood victims. So far, the government in Islamabad hasn't figured out a way to overcome this disaster. But if it wishes to survive in office for more than one term—call it a victory to stay in power even that long—it needs to undercut the Islamists aid delivery program by ramping up its own methods of careful and humane aid delivery. The government needs to maintain the people's dignity in their own view. Only then will some of the devastated people of Pakistan come around to the idea that Islamabad and its American allies are now interested in the people's welfare.

Faheem Haider is the Senior Blogger on Asia for the [Foreign Policy Association](#).

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