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FIELD REPORT

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR LIFESAVING ACTION

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Contacts:
Kristèle Younès & Patrick Duplat

PAKISTAN: INVISIBLE PEOPLE, VISIBLE CONSEQUENCES

Pakistan is witnessing the largest population movement since its independence in 1947. Needs are enormous, as millions of people have fled without anything and sought shelter in camps or with relatives. Yet, the implications of this humanitarian crisis and growing instability have not been adequately recognized. U.S. and international funding is urgently required to support the UN and aid agencies who are struggling to respond to the most pressing needs and to prepare for future displacement. The UN must also take steps to ensure that no one is forced to return home and to reduce conflicts of interest by the Pakistani military as it leads the relief effort.

FUND AID AGENCIES AND FILL THE ASSISTANCE VACUUM

Since last summer, half a million people have been displaced following operations against Taliban insurgents in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) on the border with Afghanistan. In May, at least another 1.4 million people fled their homes in less than three weeks as the Pakistani army moved into the Swat and Buner districts in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Relief efforts have so far been focused on people who have fled to camps, but the vast majority of the displaced – over 80 percent – are staying with host families who are quickly running out of resources. One aid organization has even reported "pockets of starvation."

To respond to this humanitarian emergency, the United Nations issued at the end of May a $543 million humanitarian appeal (HAP), which was a revision of an initial appeal aimed to respond to the half million displaced from FATA. This latest HAP includes emergency relief projects by all UN agencies and a number of international NGOs, and calls on donors to respond generously and immediately to one of the largest displacement crises in the world. Despite the urgency of the situation, and the strategic importance of the region, the response has been insufficient and the appeal remains severely underfunded, with only 35% of it pledged to date. The protection cluster of the appeal has only received 21% of the funding requested.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ The U.S. Congress should prioritize humanitarian assistance for displaced Pakistanis in upcoming legislation.
- ❑ OCHA should create an Emergency Response Fund (ERF) that can disburse small, flexible grants to local Pakistani aid organizations.
- ❑ The UN should appoint a special envoy to Pakistan.
- ❑ An independent team of Pakistani and UN officials should monitor whether areas are safe enough for people to return home.

To date, the U.S. has been by far the most generous donor, with $169 million contributed since last August. Congress has recently passed a supplemental spending bill that will provide another $225 million to address the displacement crisis. This includes $90 million for aid organizations and to reach traditional levels of U.S. funding to the UN Refugee Agency and the ICRC. The humanitarian community in Pakistan has praised the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) for deploying an emergency team in the field and for responding quickly to funding requests from NGOs, and the supplemental funding will support these efforts.

Congress is currently considering legislation that would authorize $1.5 billion per year for assistance to Pakistan. It remains unclear, however, how the U.S. intends to spend this money and some fear a large part of the funding will go to reconstruction and rehabilitation. While post-conflict planning is essential, the U.S. must devote resources to the immediate aid effort now, including funding for food, shelter, and drinking water, as well as trauma-related services which aid agencies report is a severe need especially amongst children. It must also prepare to allocate further monies to assistance and reconstruction as needed.

Other donors have been notoriously absent until now, or shown limited generosity. The European Commission's Humanitarian Office (ECHO) only recently announced its plan to provide €72 million for emergency humanitarian funding, but €45 million of this funding must still be approved by European member states and the European Parliament. The UK has so far provided 22 million pounds. Much more needs to be done if the international community wants to respond effectively to humanitarian needs.

The lack of sufficient assistance to the displaced is already having serious consequences. According to UNHCR, most of the new arrivals in the camps were previously staying with host families. They can no longer afford to do so, and are therefore resorting to putting up with the unbearable heat and poor living conditions in the camps. The government started to distribute 25,000 Pakistani rupees – roughly the equivalent of 300 dollars – to each IDP family, but is now backtracking. Recently, it announced it might only distribute this money to half of those registered, as it is unclear where it will be able to get these funds. Amongst the displaced and the host communities, anger is rising, and it is increasingly targeted at aid agencies unable to provide adequate services.

In a development that Refugees International has witnessed elsewhere, most recently in Iraq, the vacuum in assistance is being filled by politically motivated actors to gain popular support and allegiance. According to international and national aid agencies, political parties active in Pakistan have "set up shop" in the IDP camps and amongst host communities and provide various services, from distributing fans to providing mobile phone cards to the displaced. Some candidates for local elections have gone so far as to establish and run their own camps. Jihadist groups are present, leading an international agency to suspend its visits in some camps on Friday and Saturday as "these are the days the jihadists distribute their assistance." Even corporations have entered the fray in the absence of a comprehensive response: a cellular phone company has been tasked with managing a camp.

FUND LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

The majority of international aid organizations and UN agencies work through local partners because of their expertise and their ability to access remote areas. Many Pakistani organizations also obtain their funding from foundations and donations in parallel to the UN cluster system. Local organizations are a critical part of the overall relief effort because they have in-depth knowledge of the environment and sustain programs over an extended period of time. From a financial perspective, they are also much more cost-efficient than international NGOs as their overheads are much lower.

Despite these advantages however, no Pakistani organization participated in the consolidated appeal. There is a vast discrepancy in funding between international organizations and national ones. OCHA will need to assist these organizations to be a more cohesive unit for funding and information management purposes, possibly by encouraging the Pakistan Humanitarian Forum – a coordination group for international NGOs – to open its membership to national organizations. Moreover, it should create an Emergency Response Fund (ERF) solely dedicated to Pakistani organizations so as not to create a parallel system to the UN HAP. This fund should disburse small, flexible grants with a quick turnaround.

STRENGTHEN CIVILIAN OVERSIGHT OF THE RELIEF EFFORT

The government of Pakistan is leading the relief effort and the coordination of humanitarian actors. Since the beginning of the displacement crisis last summer, and despite the federal government's attempts to downplay the humanitarian consequences of the military offensive, the provincial government of the North West Frontier Province has taken charge and earned praise for the work it has been

doing. Islamabad eventually caught on and created a Special Support Group (SSG) to lead the central government's efforts. The SSG is under the auspices of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Ministry of Information, and contains an operational unit headed by General Nadeem, who previously managed relief efforts in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in 2005. According to all actors, General Nadeem is a highly capable, dedicated man who has excellent relations with the military, the government and the international community. Even though the NWFP government is still officially in charge at the provincial level, in reality, General Nadeem is the main decision maker.

Despite the personal merits of General Nadeem, many humanitarian actors are concerned over the military's role in the organization of the relief effort and the delivery of assistance. Unlike the earthquake, the current humanitarian crisis is the direct consequence of a conflict to which the Pakistani military is a party. As such, it is in the interest of the army to run a "hearts and minds" campaign and they could use assistance as a tool to win over the population as opposed to distributing it based on needs alone. Aid organizations have also objected to the presence of the military in IDP camps, arguing that it offers an easy target for the militants, putting civilians and humanitarian groups at risk, while also being problematic given the trauma suffered by many displaced as the result of military operations.

Conflicts of interest caused by a government-led relief effort have arisen elsewhere. With a governmental agency in charge of registering internally displaced people, the government is effectively in charge of determining who is an IDP, based on criteria such as the location of conflict areas. This has led to disagreements between the government and the humanitarian community over the status of some displaced who fled places deemed safe by Islamabad, such as Upper Dir, where fighting continues. Disagreements also include the status of those who left areas that are likely to become conflict areas in the near future, such as Waziristan.

The UN has come under fire from many analysts and aid agencies for "getting in bed with the government" and individual agencies have been labeled by critics as "the government's implementing partners." The scale of the crisis has led to questions over the ability of humanitarian actors – including UN agencies – to operate independently. The lack of effective response to the displaced from FATA was in part due to the UN's reluctance to confront the government and acknowledge the scale of the problem. The tendency to view the serious humanitarian situation as only a temporary problem was illustrated by the absence of OCHA and the nomination of a double-hatted Resident Coordinator-Humanitarian Coordinator with little humanitarian experience.

In theory, the UN should maintain itself at arm's length from both the government and the military in responding to this crisis. In practice, it is extremely difficult to do so, and most critics have failed to offer real alternatives to the way the UN currently operates. The UN is in Pakistan at the invitation of the government, and needs to respect its leadership when it comes to providing assistance to the displaced. All actors also agree that the military is by far the most organized and well-resourced institution in the country and that General Nadeem is probably the best-suited person for the job. In the words of an aid worker, however, not facing up to the problem now is like "burying one's head in the sand," in the face of possible conflicts of interest, especially on the question of IDP returns.

The separation of the resident coordinator and humanitarian coordinator roles earlier in June was a good first step to ensure that humanitarian concerns are raised at the highest level. The ramping up of OCHA in Pakistan also led to improvements in coordination. The UN must not be shy about vocally denouncing abuses and insist on the respect of humanitarian principles by all actors. To continue advocating for respect for independent humanitarian action, the UN should also appoint a special envoy to conduct regular visits to Pakistan. This will underscore the importance of the crisis for the international community, while giving the UN the political clout required to ensure regular oversight of the management of the relief operation by the government and the military.

The UN should also see this crisis as an opportunity to strengthen civilian structures within Pakistan. While the military operation has led to much civilian suffering, there is now an opportunity for the Pakistani government to show leadership, both in the organization of the relief efforts and the post-conflict reconstruction phases. The U.S., the UN and other actors should work with the relevant ministries and provincial institutions to reduce the influence of the military and assist technocrats in leading the way towards a new Pakistan.

ENSURE RETURNS ARE VOLUNTARY

The government of Pakistan has been sending mixed signals on whether or not displaced Pakistanis would be forced to return home, one day talking about voluntary returns then setting fixed return dates while the conflict is ongoing. This is not just the product of a diversity of views inside the

government, but a clear intent on the part of some – including in the military – to see the rapid conclusion of their operations. The army's definition of 'cleared zones,' however, does not necessarily translate into 'safe zones' for civilians.

These concerns are borne out of a precedent. Displaced people from Bajaur agency in FATA, who had been told late last year to return to their home districts, went back to an insecure environment where military operations were still taking place. Refugees International interviewed one family which had fled to a camp, was encouraged to return home, and had to go back to the camp because their village was still in a conflict zone.

The UN and major international donors need to commission independent verification teams composed of government officials, UN staff and Pakistani civil society leaders (perhaps from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan) to determine whether returns to conflict areas are desirable and sustainable. Internally displaced people have a right to return to their homes voluntarily, in safety and dignity, as outlined in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. The conditions for returns must be set out clearly. Safety is the obvious priority. In addition, civilian government institutions must be established and basic services must be restored.

Donors indicate that they will not fund projects which encourage unsustainable returns, but the U.S. and other governments have a poor track record in confronting the government of Pakistan on protection of civilians. They have remained mostly silent in the past months on the conduct of hostilities, the fate of the populations trapped in conflict zones, and the push to return displaced Bajauris.

PREPARE FOR ALL CONTINGENCIES

The military has made no secret of its desire to pursue its operations in the southern FATA region of Waziristan. It is likely that this push will be coordinated with a NATO operation in neighboring Afghanistan, resulting in a large-scale displacement to Dera Ismail Khan and surrounding NWFP districts. This region is remote, and even less accessible to humanitarian agencies. The rugged landscape, prevailing insecurity and historical lack of presence of aid organizations will probably translate into thin levels of assistance and inadequate information on the humanitarian situation.

International donors, in particular the U.S., should encourage the Pakistani government to prepare for large scale displacement and share information on humanitarian conditions with the UN. Preparedness will be necessary to prevent a new humanitarian crisis. Many criticize the Pakistani government for not preparing better to deal with the humanitarian consequences of the current military operation. If it wishes to garner popular support, the government must do better next time.

In the planning of the Waziristan operation, there are indications that the government of Pakistan is looking to avoid additional widespread displacement by keeping people from leaving the area. This is an unacceptable proposition, as civilians have a right to seek protection from conflict. The international community must reiterate that civilians should be free to move to any district or region, and ensure that civilians are not trapped in the conflict areas.

CONCLUSION

While the displacement crisis in Pakistan is nearly a year old, its magnitude, the scope of the needs and its political implications have not been fully grasped in foreign capitals. The international response has been far too slow. The ongoing humanitarian operation is only the start of what will have to be a prolonged and massive aid effort. Displaced families need immediate relief, and in time will require renewed confidence and support to return home in safety and dignity.

The Obama administration has repeatedly stated the geostrategic importance of the region and it should seize this opportunity to show its leadership. This is not merely a question of funding, though the humanitarian assistance and reconstruction efforts will need robust financial commitments. The U.S. also needs to be seen as rising above military objectives and showing genuine concern for the fate of civilians.

Kristèle Younès and Patrick Duplat assessed the humanitarian situation in Pakistan in June.