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Pakistan: Resources Inadequate to Meet Emergency Needs of Earthquake Victims

After an initial slow start, the emergency response to the earthquake that devastated large areas of northern Pakistan has finally geared up over the past several weeks.

Humanitarian agencies and the Pakistani military are delivering critical relief supplies and creating distribution points in higher elevations to ensure that affected populations can survive the brutal Himalayan winter, but it is still unclear whether supplies will reach all of those in need.

Aid agencies and the Pakistani military are working well together, and the latter is receiving high marks for its response to the earthquake. The United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations are beginning to receive funding, albeit for not more than six months, to increase their activities, but current funding levels are inadequate to meet the large scale emergency needs of the nearly three million people left homeless by the earthquake. In the recent donor conference in Pakistan, donors generously pledged money to assist in reconstruction efforts, but donors have not been nearly as generous in responding to the immediate emergency needs in the earthquake affected areas.

Delivering relief supplies throughout the earthquake affected areas is a logistical nightmare, particularly in higher elevations. Even before the earthquake, many areas were inaccessible by road. Villages are spread out, so agencies must deliver supplies to many different locations. There are few places where helicopters can land. Heavy snow fall will soon make it difficult for helicopters to make their deliveries and has already forced the UN to cancel relief flights.

Given these logistical challenges, it is critical that air assets be used as effectively and efficiently as possible and that donors invest in these efforts. Sling load operations will be critical, because helicopters will then be able to hover without landing, pick up their cargo, and deliver supplies in a shorter amount of time. These changes would lead to a four-fold increase in the effectiveness of relief flights. Militaries from NATO member states should provide technical assistance to the Pakistani military, UN agencies, and NGOs to train staff in loading procedures and sling load operations

and should help supply the necessary slings and nets. The onset of winter means a reduction in the number of days in which the weather will permit helicopter operations, as well as the number of hours available each day; it is therefore necessary to make maximum use of the available flight time. Toward this end, aircraft de-icing equipment is urgently needed to enable flight operations to begin at daybreak, when the risk of freezing temperatures presents its greatest safety risk.

Coordination of the various actors providing emergency relief has been problematic. The UN recently agreed to assign lead agencies to coordinate the response to emergencies caused by conflict in key sectors and areas of activity, such as shelter, water and sanitation, food assistance, medical care, and protection. This approach, called the cluster response, is being applied for the first time in Pakistan, even though it was intended for use in responding to conflicted-related emergencies rather than natural disasters.

The idea is that government and UN agencies, donors, and NGOs coordinate under the leadership of an operational UN agency, such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for camp management or the World Health Organization for health. In Pakistan, however, the generous response of the Pakistani diaspora and the private sector has taken place outside of this coordination framework. The cluster response places heavy demands on staff time for meetings, and this takes away from operations, especially for short-staffed agencies and NGOs. Lack of communication between and among cluster lead agencies hampers an integrated response to, for example, water and sanitation provision for camps, since sanitation and camp management are the responsibility of two different agencies.

Before the earthquake, there were no international NGOs working in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, so the UN and

international humanitarian NGOs have had to start their programs in these areas from scratch. Many international NGOs are finding it difficult to recruit qualified staff. Given the scope of the destruction, lack of staff housing is a major obstacle. Humanitarian staff are living under difficult conditions in tent encampments that cannot accommodate large numbers of additional people. The relative scope of the emergency and the combined logistical challenges of terrain and weather necessitate large-scale NGO involvement, but winterized living and working accommodations in the operational areas are insufficient for the number of staff required. It is necessary to expand funding and assistance to UN and NGOs to accommodate more humanitarian staff.

Over three million people in Pakistan became homeless after the earthquake, and as a result emergency shelter, and in particular, the procurement and distribution of tents, has been the priority. Immediately after the earthquake, the Pakistani military and aid agencies began distributing a wide variety of tents, including less appropriate non-winterized ones. After several weeks, it became apparent that tents, especially non-winterized tents, would not adequately protect people during the harsh winter, where snowfall can reach over 20 feet in some of the mountainous areas. Now, distribution of emergency shelter repair kits, which include sheets of corrugated metal for the roof, plastic sheeting and tools, has become the priority. These kits rely on homeowners reusing the rubble from their original homes. While these shelter repair kits are an improvement over tents, it is not clear how well these temporary shelters can protect people in the winter, particularly in the absence of sources of heat.

There are critical gaps in the areas of water and sanitation, camp management, food, and protection. The water and sanitation needs are massive. Camps lack adequate facilities, and the earthquake damaged many existing safe water sources in villages. There are few NGOs with the technical expertise to cover these needs, and there are real concerns about disease outbreaks. As for food provision, the World Food Program, lacking operational partner agencies, has often resorted to dropping food at central distribution sites without any agency in place to monitor who receives it. Capacity in camp management and protection is also extremely low.

The predominant relief strategy thus far has focused on providing assistance to people in their places of origin in higher elevations before winter sets in and these areas become inaccessible. While this strategy is understandable, there has not been enough planning regarding how to respond if large numbers of people move down to lower elevations, as many traditionally do each winter. Refugees International interviewed nine families in three camps around Mansehra, and they reported that all the members of their villages are in the

process of coming down for the winter because they are concerned about their survival. There has been a slow but steady trickle into the camps, and it is likely that this movement will increase, although in some areas, people will stay in their communities to protect their land rights. The extent of the likely migration is difficult to predict, but neither the government nor aid agencies are prepared to respond to a large-scale population movement.

There are already hundreds of tent camps in many different locations. The sizes range from a few tents to hundreds. Few of these settlements are officially recognized camps, and the government and UNHCR have not to date clarified how unofficial, self-settled camps will be supported or how additional arrivals will be accommodated. The self-settled camps generally have no camp management structure and few, if any, water and sanitation facilities. Disease, therefore, continues to be a grave concern. Given the mountainous terrain, finding suitable locations to decongest existing camps and accommodate additional arrivals is difficult.

Making the existing official and unofficial camps habitable should be a priority. The government has indicated that it would like to see the people from the earthquake zone now living in urban areas return to areas closer to their places of origin. But finding suitable areas for these people to return to is a problem, so the government should allow people to stay in urban areas until winter ends.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ Donors generously fund emergency activities in northern Pakistan, particularly water and sanitation and camp management, as well as provide the necessary support for the UN and NGOs to accommodate their staff in the field to enable an expanded humanitarian response. Funding should be provided to allow aid agencies to plan for longer-term programming.
- ❑ Donors assist the UN to improve its logistical capacity, particularly to enhance the efficiency of air assets through a significant expansion of cargo sling load operations, and the provision of de-icing equipment to allow for extended daily operations throughout the winter
- ❑ The Government of Pakistan and UNHCR develop a uniform response on how to assist people living in unofficial, self-settled camps.
- ❑ The Government of Pakistan and the UN immediately begin to lay the groundwork to respond in the case of large-scale population movement from higher to lower elevations and identify NGO partners to assist in the response.

Senior Advocate Michelle Brown and Director of Operations Michael McIntyre just returned from a ten-day assessment of earthquake-affected areas in Pakistan.