

The Right to Aid

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When disasters strike, such as the current devastating floods in Pakistan, it is expected that the international community will provide help, through the United Nations system, large non-governmental organizations and directly to the government. It is also expected that individuals help, be it wealthier members of the society in the country and nationals living abroad. In Pakistan's case, all this happens now. But the help coming in is less than requirements. It has been estimated that at least USD five hundred millions are needed to respond adequately to the immediate needs of the some twenty million people directly affected in the flooded areas covering no less than about one-fifth of the land. Later, a few months ahead, more money is needed to provide food and medical aid, rehabilitation and reconstruction over several years. It has been estimated that some USD ten billion will be needed for that, although nobody can really put an accurate figure at this stage.

It should be said that the immediate help that is made available after a natural or man-made disaster is always too little and too late, and it is also a general fact that aid for rehabilitation and reconstruction falls short of needs. The affected people have to bear the brunt and the country has to coordinate and find resources from own budgets, with additional international help. International help is a right, as the title of this article indicates. The fact that human beings help each other in times of crisis is what makes us *human*. It is a tradition to help, and sometimes a legal requirement, and in maritime law, for example, it is a crime if a ship does not help another ship in difficulty or rescue sailors in danger of drowning. The current floods are similar, only thousands of times worse. It is a *human right* to receive help when we are in need. Our duty to help is clear.

After the Tsunami in South Asia at the end of 2004, and after the earthquake in Pakistan on 8 October 2005, the international community responded more generously than what has been the case this time. Yet, we should not be too pessimistic either. My own home country Norway, for example, has already provided NOK one hundred million (about USD sixteen million), although five times that amount was provided after the earthquake.

There are ways of explaining the level of response, including the fact that the immediate loss of life was much higher after the earthquake than in the current floods. Furthermore, the floods are likely to last for a short time, after which the affected people can move back to their homesteads and villages and begin rebuild the infrastructure, replenish their livestock, prepare their fields for replanting, and so on. All this will require aid, but most of it will be development aid, not emergency aid. We know from experience, however, that the international community responds more quickly to the sudden disasters than to the longer-term development needs, and that does not promise well.

Let us pray that the international community will keep focus on Pakistan for some time, and that other disasters don't strike, so that we can receive long-term aid from the international community to handle the physical needs and help heal some of the psychosocial scars from the current disaster. Without assistance from outside, a poor country like Pakistan is bound to experience major setbacks and the poor people will suffer. I don't believe it will lead to further development of extremism, but it could lead to increase in crime, worsening of the general education and health situation for girls and boys, and so on, and a general hardening of the society. However, if aid is provided, Pakistan has shown that it is indeed capable of making good use of it.

Last week, I had the opportunity to attend a seminar where the Chairman of ERRA, the Earthquake Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Authority, Altaf Saleem was speaking. The account of ERRA's work was impressive. Yes, I am sure there were shortcomings, most likely some funds being misused, delays having occurred, some needy people not receiving assistance, and so on, but all in all, I believe ERRA and Pakistan should be proud of how the USD six billion have been spent up to this date when eighty or ninety percent of the work has been implemented. About a third was spent on the immediate response, and almost all came from the international community; the remaining amount, with significant local portions, has been spent over the five years since the earthquake struck. ERRA and the National Disaster Management Authority have done their work well. Yet, further preparedness, first aid training, and other things should be implemented to make government authorities, schools, hospitals, and so on, able to handle disasters when they strike – and we know they will strike, from time to time, but we don't know when, where, what type and in what magnitude.

I hope we will see similar good rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts after the current floods, and that help is also provided to other poor people, notably internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Swat and Tribal Areas, Afghan refugees and other poverty stricken and vulnerable men and women. The fact that the World Bank has already promised a credit just short of USD one billion to help in reconstruction after the floods promises well. And the Asian Development Bank, ADB, will lend USD 2 billion. This should lead the way for development aid coming forth from other donors, too, because the amounts are sound big but are small considering the tasks. In addition, more immediate emergency aid is still required.

But why does a developing country, this time Pakistan, needing emergency aid, have to behave like a beggar, supported by the United Nations?

People in a country facing a natural or man-made disaster have the right to receive humanitarian aid from domestic sources and the international community, it is not something we can qualify for and receive if we deserve it.

In this disaster as in other terrible disasters, people everywhere show compassion and do what is possible to help, or so we think. Yet, let me focus a bit more on the way aid is obtained because I find that the current humanitarian aid system is not allowing the recipients the dignity they have the right to.

The United Nations issues appeals for emergency aid and coordinates immediate response through its Office for Humanitarian Aid, OCHA, and other key offices in the field, such as the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, the World Food Programme, WFP, the Children's Fund, UNICEF and others, and they distribute materials from their depots and warehouses in the region. At UN Headquarters, the emergency fund was increased after the Tsunami in 2004 so that some funds are available for immediate use the same day, or the next few days after a disaster has struck.

However, based on the constantly repeated appeals on international TV, the UN HQ budgets for emergencies must have been very limited, and we ask why. How come that the UN Chief himself and Heads of the various agencies have to behave like beggars and fundraisers?

They should help assess the needs, with the afflicted country's government and civil society, but they should not spend too much time on appealing for funds. Instead, they should focus their experience and expertise on providing immediate response and professional advice, and they should document and analyze actions to draw lessons for future crises elsewhere in the future. The UN should otherwise let the media do its job, report on the disaster, but neither should see it as their job to become beggars and fundraisers on behalf of the affected people, whose dignity must be maintained.

Besides, how come that the UN agencies and other international organizations, on which we all rely in case of disasters, are not able to advance funds even if they don't have them in their bank accounts? How come that the donor countries, the owners of the UN, worry about overdrafts when they should trust the UN with open cheques in case of disasters? It is a disgrace for disaster afflicted people and countries that the current system exists.

I hope that when the United Nations meets with the Pakistani officials present, some of these issues will be addressed so that Pakistan and the country's flood victims can get the aid they have the right to and certainly need for.

Humanitarian and development aid rests on a moral foundation. The world history is basically a description of the struggle for a fairer world. The rich countries, and the rich people within poor and rich countries, have a special duty to help in emergencies – and all of us have a duty to change structures so that conditions can become more equal for all in future.

At this difficult time in Pakistan, during the holy month of Ramadan, we all reflect on issues of fairness and unfairness, those who need help and those who have the privilege of being in a position to help others. In the end, we are all straws in the wind, we are all dust, but we are also, each of us, more than dust, unique and valuable human beings.

When I was preparing this article, I several times thought about St. Francis of Assisi's words, notably that it is through giving that we receive. I pray that we all do what we can in the current disaster. Under just slightly different circumstances, you and I could have been the ones in need of aid. Good then if those helping us would have been generous and helped us so that we could have maintained our dignity, and even build back better, so that our future could become more prosperous than the past. That is what the flood victims need. (An earlier version of this article was published in *The Nation*, 19.08.10.)

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