

After the deluge

Outsiders' cautious reaction to the disaster so far is less heartless than it seems. But now is the time to help.

THE United Nations secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon, swooped low over the massive swamp that used to be central Pakistan and said he had never before seen anything quite so terrible. Flood waters that gushed from the Indus river, which divides the country north-to-south, had inundated villages, towns and whole districts. The immediate toll can be measured in loss of human life, livestock, crops and food stores, and in destroyed homes and irrigation systems. Worse will come if disease and hunger take hold. Some cases of cholera have already been reported. Millions of the displaced are at risk of diarrhoea, malaria and other mundane killers. The UN's boss was surely right in saying that the "unprecedented floods require an unprecedented response."



Some argue that outsiders should already have done more. The floods are nearly a month old. By contrast, within a couple of weeks of the earthquake in Haiti, governments and other donors had made grand pledges of help and foreign agencies were jostling to aid the victims. Outsiders were similarly generous after a tsunami struck Asia in December 2004. Sudden disasters invite instant sympathy and speedy assistance. Floods, like famines, are often slower-building horrors. Yet their victims still deserve the world's support.

That sounds a compelling indictment. In fact the picture is more complicated. To begin with, the memory of previous aid triumphs is highly selective: the initial response to Haiti was chaotic and not all that promised cash arrived. The flawed arithmetic of disaster response tends to equate need for aid with the immediate death toll. Although some 20m Pakistanis may be affected, the official count of those known to have perished is 1,475. Roughly as many were killed by recent landslides and floods in north-east China. The figure is less than 1% of the numbers killed by Haiti's quake or by the Asian tsunami (over 220,000 in each case, most of them as disaster struck).

Nor has Pakistan made itself an easy place to help. Its president, Asif Ali Zardari, went on with a tour of Europe partly to promote his son's political career as the floods swamped ever larger swathes of his country. He left his prime minister to oversee flood relief, claiming to be raising awareness overseas of Pakistan's plight. At home, however, rage has been building among flood victims. The armed forces, rather than civilian politicians, took the lead in rescue efforts and in organising tours for the camera crews whose pictures prick consciences.

Some donors still have bad memories of an earlier disaster, in 2005, when an earthquake struck the Pakistan-run bit of Kashmir, killing nearly 80,000 people. Foreign governments and charities promised some \$6 billion in aid, to be spent by Pakistani officials and by local and foreign NGOs. Some, inevitably, was wasted or stolen. More troublingly, some local charities, such as Jamaat-ud-Dawa, which had links to extremists, ended up claiming credit for the relief work. And that is before taking into account the credible worries that Pakistan's spies support

elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan and have done too little to rein in Islamist terror directed at India.

Stopping bad by doing good

At this point, though, the West's caution risks becoming not just heartless but counterproductive. After all, concerns about the government's probity have not stopped the delivery of massive military aid to it. And the people who need help are not the government, but the ordinary Pakistanis whose livelihoods have been washed out by the floods. Nobody will gain if the sodden field is left to groups with extremist ties (see Banyan). Indeed, the West still has an opportunity not just to save lives but to win over minds.

In Pakistan the greatest need will be in the coming weeks and months, as flood waters recede, homes and roads need to be rebuilt and fields have to be replanted. That gives donors time to find effective ways to co-ordinate their help—ways that, where possible, should bypass Mr Zardari's loose-fingered friends. Already there are signs of progress. Some \$3 billion has been offered by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, the UN has set up a fund and donations from governments are starting to flow. America, a provider of much military and other aid to Pakistan, is lending helicopters and providing other help, hoping to show ordinary Pakistanis that it is not the hostile bully many of them believe it to be.

India, Pakistan's traditional foe, could also turn disaster into opportunity. Some have described the current floods as the worst battering Pakistan has taken since the man-made disaster of partition from India in 1947. India itself has suffered recent floods and has offered some help (Pakistan is unsure whether to accept). Delivering it could show that India genuinely wants its troubled neighbour to recover and to prosper. A little money now could go a long way.

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