

Averting Our Eyes:

The Shameful International Response to Pakistanis' Suffering

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We all know the Pakistan flood through numbers. It covered more than one fifth of Pakistan's landmass, the equivalent to the entire U.S. eastern seaboard being under water. More than 20 million people were affected. That's roughly the entire population of Syria and more than twice that of Israel's population of 7.6 million. More than one million homes were destroyed. Crops and fields were devastated and millions of heads of small, medium and large livestock perished. While this calamity affected more people than Hurricane Katrina, the Indian Ocean Tsunami and the Haiti Earthquake *combined*, it has elicited anemic international donor response. Within 10 days of the onset of the crisis, the international community pledged [\\$495.00 per person](#) to the victims of the Haiti earthquake. In contrast, only [\\$3.20](#) were committed per flood-affected person in Pakistan. Miraculously, fewer than 2,000 persons died and most victims perished in the early days of the deluge before the government could act to prevent further loss of lives.

Media Fixations and Fictions

Despite the math of the travesty, Pakistan's devastating monsoon-related floods have been curiously under-covered even while the international media continues to sweep its flashlights through Pakistan's various closeted ties to the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Afghan Taliban. When the media have broached the topic, they have done so to elaborate upon well-worn and hackneyed story-lines. One ever-popular story line is that the Islamist militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (under its various noms de aid provision) will help if the world does not [just like it did in the 2005 earthquake](#). Needless to say, these groups may have been first in and first to hold press conferences but they were a [minuscule](#) part of the efforts to relieve Pakistanis' suffering during the earthquake. Despite the media hype in the earthquake, recent robust work by [Tahir Andrabi and Jishnu Das](#) exposes the simple truth: their [contributions](#) were negligible. Their contributions to the current crisis are more hype than reality. During a recent presentation on Pakistan's floods at Georgetown University, [Ambassador Husain Haqqani](#) noted that a mere 29 camps are run by militant groups compared to more than 5,000 camps run by the government.

A second story line examines the floods through the lens of Pakistan's historically fraught civilian-military ties. Indeed, the Pakistani army has been at the front of flood relief and the military is viewed within and without Pakistan as an entity distinct from and unbridled by civilian governance structures.

This stems from the fact that the army has run the country for more than half of the country's history and indirectly for much of the remainder. This legacy is inescapable. And indeed, ordinary Pakistanis -- much less international observers -- may see the army as a government unto itself. But here is the reality: NO government could have handled this crisis. Hurricane Katrina was barely managed by the U.S. government. (Many countries -- including India and Sri Lanka -- [offered disaster assistance](#) to the United States to manage that natural disaster). Moreover, the United States employed the [U.S. National Guard](#) as well as private security firms such as [Blackwater](#) to manage the crisis. No country could manage a disaster on the scale of this earthquake without employing their national militaries. Those who have criticized the government's slow response to the tragedy should note that the Pakistan army is currently a part of the government, not the government.

A third story tends to focus upon the impact of the floods upon Pakistan's domestic political fabric. President Zardari did little to mitigate the predictable feeding frenzy while he was ferrying around to his family home in Normandy France among other foreign venues while his citizenry suffered. That said, the various doomsayers who predicted the [collapse of the government](#), a military coup, much less an "[Islamic revolution](#)" have been proven wrong. While many observers debate whether Pakistan [is](#) or [is not](#) a failed or failing state, history has shown that Pakistan and Pakistanis have an amazing ability to keep on keeping on. Inelegantly put, it is a stable instability.

Donor Fatigue or Crude Cynicism?

Despite the enormity of the challenge, the international community has been niggardly in offering assistance. (That said, the United States has been the biggest donor.) But this reticence to give is not difficult to understand.

The international community has had to repeatedly bail Pakistan out of various compounding crises. Pakistani elites have shamefully refused to implement tax reform preferring to raise revenue through regressive sales taxes that most punish the poor while demurring from implementing taxes on agricultural land or business, the financial redoubts of Pakistan's wealthy elites. [Secretary of State Hillary Clinton](#) vexed observers in Pakistan and beyond when she stated a simple truth "It's absolutely unacceptable for those with means in Pakistan not to be doing their fair share to help their own people while taxpayers in Europe, the United States and other contributing countries are all chipping in."

When Pakistan was [hit by a devastating earthquake in 2005](#) that killed more than 70,000, it was governed by the international darling President Musharraf who dazzled Washington with his alleged "[moderated jihad](#)" and "[enlightened moderation](#)" philosophies. By 2010, most Americans have come to see Pakistan as part of the problem in the war on terror rather than any part of its solution. The near constant involvement of Pakistan's territory in proliferating [international terror plots](#) has left the global publics apprehensive about Pakistan. Images of the smiling and even jocular [Mr. Faisal Shahzad](#), a Pakistani-American, who failed to detonate his bomb New York City's Times Square have done little to ameliorate public concerns about Pakistan.

And unlike Haiti, Pakistan has one of the world's largest militaries (with more than 550,000 active troops in the army alone) and a growing nuclear weapons program. The army's demands that it gets the biggest slice of a pie that is inflated in considerable measure by the international community have done little to increase international philanthropic enthusiasm.

To make matters worse, the international community has been hesitant to give to flood relief efforts because of alleged [rampant corruption](#) across the government and fears that moneys sent will be diverted into the pockets of Pakistan's corrupt minions rather than the displaced, homeless, food-deprived millions. Civilians are alleged to be more corrupt than army rulers, even though the latter have provided [no better governance](#) than the former. That said, U.S. efforts to provide relief to victims of Hurricane Katrina have recently been under [scrutiny for corruption](#) as well.

The regrettable truth is that all of these things are likely to be true in some measure and unlikely to change in any time frame relevant to the current humanitarian, social and economic disaster. The international community is exhausted with Pakistan's chronic inability to transform itself into a responsible state that can exert its sovereignty by paying its bills. Pakistanis will unlikely expand the tax net to include the wealthy. The army will continue to cut the resource pie as it likes. Corruption will remain either civilian or military governance. Pakistan is likely to remain a key supporter of groups that the United States and the international community view as extreme dangers to collective security interests such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad and the Afghan Taliban.

But the indifference to the plight of ordinary Pakistanis is a deep cause for international shame.

Changing the Narrative

Even though no country -- howsoever rich or developed -- could manage a disaster the size of this flood, the simple fact is that fewer than 2,000 people died. This indicates that something went very, very right. The government of Pakistan and its domestic and international partners deserve credit for this. The lack of initial lethality should not be a cause for insouciance. The flood will likely to continue claiming victims due to water-borne disease, lack of clean drinking water and sanitation, food scarcity, lack of shelter and the like. Children who are being born and nursed under these conditions may have different -- and less positive -- immediate and long-term health outcomes than cohorts born before the onset of this calamity.

Many of Pakistan's worst hit by the flood were already hit by the same terrorists that the entire world fears and reviles. Pakistan's northern territories of Swat had been ravaged by Pakistan Taliban since 2007. After several brief military approaches, the Pakistan army went in seriously in the summer of 2009 and after more than a year of combat, restored security in Swat. The interregnum was short lived. Within weeks of the [Swat Peace Fair in July](#), the floods came through wiping away a century of infrastructure -- such as it was. [Southern Punjab](#) was also hit hard. Southern Punjab has also endured the brunt of terrorism. To deny Pakistan's flood victims assistance is to doubly punish them.

In short, the international community may have its legitimate concerns about the Pakistan government. But Pakistan's people are in dire need of help. We should not shut our eyes to their plight due to these

political concerns howsoever valid as even the most effective and transparent government would tremble under the weight of this disaster.

Continued failure to help Pakistan's most vulnerable is indeed a cause for shame.