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China, among Others, Ought to Move on a Strategic Aid in Pakistan

By Yossef Ben-Meir, Published: June 12, 2009

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Contrary to impressions in the west, recent polls indicate that the majority of Pakistanis consider economic and political conditions to be a greater priority than terrorism, suggesting a real opportunity to gain control over the global threat that the Pakistani situation poses. Not since the Marshall Plan after World War II has the international community been absolutely

obliged to get aid right, with global peace and untold human lives hanging in the balance.

Thus depending on how and for what international aid is administered in Pakistan, the hearts and minds of its people and the opposing forces they might choose to collaborate with hang in the balance. Taliban and Al Qaeda havens are encouraged in environments with suppressed human development.

More than 2 million Pakistanis have been displaced from their homes, most since early May. The insurgency has wrested control of the vast Federally Administered Tribal Areas, the much of the Swat district and the adjoining Buner district from the government. It threatens the Punjab, where most Pakistanis live and where the nation's nuclear weapons are located--and to control the seat of power in Islamabad.

Since May 20, the United States has pledged more than US\$300 million in emergency aid which must be ratified by the US Congress. The administration wants Congress to approve US\$7.5 billion more over five years to stabilize the shaky government. The international community also pledged US\$4 billion last month in Tokyo. Since May, China announced it is sending \$5.4 million in emergency aid.

If the international community, working with the Pakistani government to build the people's governing capacities, can implement successful strategic development in Pakistan, the insurgency can be undermined, stability can take hold, and the people themselves will deny the return of the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

Since 2001, the United States has spent US\$12 billion to help Pakistanis. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggests that overall these efforts were unsuccessful. Failure on this scale actually hurts the public's perception of the United States and of their own government. In the current climate in Pakistan, the challenge to create successful development is far greater, and so the same international aid approaches will certainly



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result in the same miserable outcomes. The situation requires a rethinking of the entire aid approach.

The goal of aid is to engage members of Pakistan's local villages and neighborhoods to implement their own development projects. Critical benefits follow from this.

Economically, since local people typically know best the viable and culturally appropriate opportunities in their own surroundings, development projects they determine (versus those by government and international agencies) are more sustainable, and generate more jobs and better livelihoods. Politically, the process of local people together identifying and implementing projects is participatory democracy and a bottom-up people's movement. Socially, local groups planning development is in itself educational and fosters public trust toward the providers of aid, including government.

China, with its cordial ties with Pakistan, ought to quickly move to implement development programs that they together have already identified to cooperate. For example, China and Pakistan recently agreed to promote sustainable development among local communities (approximately 20,000 people) of the Khunjerab National Park in northern Pakistan. Successful projects are determined and managed by local communities, such as in agriculture, health, education, irrigation, and water management –project types China already agreed to support. China can also offer to expand its cooperation to other national parks, including the Margalla Hills National Park which is nearest to Islamabad.

The Chinese leadership also expressed its desire for greater people to people contact with Pakistan, particularly among youth. In this regard, university partnerships could transfer development related skills that involve enabling Pakistani youth to work in rural areas (where most Pakistanis live) and catalyze and facilitate community planning of development. Free trade between China and Pakistan should involve China (having the far larger economy) funding local rural development so as to avoid economic displacement of Pakistani families that can occur as economic restructuring takes place. University partnerships along the lines described above can help diversify the Pakistani rural economy, which prevents dislocation caused by free trade.

With the mayhem in Pakistan, what other kinds of initiatives can further the goal of aid? First, more than half of the 2 million plus refugees are registered with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. International aid should be available to ensure the UN's registration program is fully funded, and that refugees are aware that the previously stated goal of aid will be vigorously pursued, initially targeting displaced communities (many from Swat), impoverished fringes of the Punjab province, and the Buner district, which connects to the Punjab.

Second, approximately 10 percent of the refugees are in camps along roads, such as south of Swat, where food distribution centers are too. Anger and conflict will only grow the longer people are in camps. As much as possible, organization of camps should be similar to that of the specific locales the refugees come from, so dialogue over new development projects can begin before they return to their communities.

Finally, the Provincial Reconstruction Team model used in Iraq and Afghanistan with some success can be improved on by training Pakistani teams to transfer skills in

facilitating “participatory” development planning methods. These methods (using community members and leaders, government and civil representatives, school teachers and university students) help local community groups identify and prioritize development projects, and create a plan of action for their implementation.

The local participatory approach to development is an alternative to the terribly wasteful and even harmful top-down approach to international aid used previously in Pakistan. With world peace increasingly at stake because of the Pakistani situation, bottom-up aid is the urgent alternative to the current approach.

(Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir is a sociologist at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and president of the High Atlas Foundation, a nonprofit organization that advances community development in Morocco.)

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