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Strategic Aid In Pakistan

By Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir

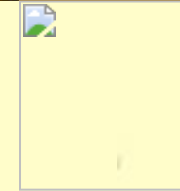
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Depending on how and for what international aid is administered in Pakistan, the hearts and minds of its people, and which of the opposing forces they collaborate with, hang in the balance. Recent polls indicate that the majority of Pakistanis consider economic and political conditions of greater priority than terrorism, suggesting a real opportunity to gain control over the global threat that the Pakistani situation poses.

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

On May 20, the United States pledged \$110 million in emergency aid, and the administration wants Congress to approve \$7.5 billion more over 5 years to stabilize the shaky Pakistani government. The international community also pledged \$4 billion last month in Tokyo. Taliban and Al Qaeda havens are encouraged in environments with suppressed human development, and extremist groups also provide some basic support for desperate people and so gain their trust.

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If the United States and 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. Thus, the American special envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard C. Holbrooke, and his team are visiting the conflict region this week to evaluate not only how to meet the pressing needs of those displaced, but also the widely recognized (including by the Joint Chiefs of Staff) long-term solution for security--economic, political, and social development.

Military experts suggest that approximately 1 million troops are needed to stabilize a country of this size--a commitment only possible if a worst case scenario unfolds. 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.

Since 2001, the United States has spent \$12 billion to help Pakistanis. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested 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 result in the same miserable outcomes. The situation requires a rethinking of the entire aid approach, grounding it in lessons learned from past development experiences in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Before describing strategies to deliver aid, its overall intended goal should be stated: 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

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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 a participatory form of democracy and organizes a bottom-up people's movement. Socially, local groups planning development, which necessarily involves sharing ideas and information, is in itself educational, and when aid is directed to support these processes, public trust is fostered toward the providers of aid, including government.

With the mayhem in Pakistan, what kinds of initiatives can further the goal of aid, where should they initially be targeted, and how can they be implemented? 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 U.N.'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. Local voices regarding productive local development must be awakened as soon as possible, which should also galvanize popular opinion supportive of moderation.

Third, the Provincial Reconstruction Team model used in Iraq and Afghanistan with some success can be improved on by training Pakistani teams (with respectful international assistance) 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. Teams also build partnerships by working to include relevant Pakistani government agencies in the local design processes of projects.

Finally, discussion should be accelerated with the Pakistani government on instituting measures that decentralize decision-making authority for development to district and local levels, such as simplifying the formation of civil and political groups, which in turn, can strengthen national sovereignty.

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.

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