

## The Best Friends Aid Can Buy

By Alex Stonehill

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I'm sitting on a windy mountaintop in the Lesser Himalayas surrounded by men with weathered faces, long graying beards and red *kiffeyehs* draped around their shoulders. Fifty pairs of steely eyes stare expectantly as one man barks at me in Pashtun and those squatting around him murmur in agreement.

No, this isn't a paranoid American's terrorist kidnapping nightmare. This is earthquake relief in Pakistan's remote North West Frontier Province and I'm here with a local organization called Rural Support Programs Network (RSPN) that is desperately trying to rebuild this troubled region.

Eight months after a mammoth earthquake devastated northern Pakistan, many of the villagers here in the remote, rugged foothills of the Himalayas remain homeless and desperate. A moldy tent that now serves as the village school and a few backpacks bearing the USAID logo on the backs of the youngest boys are meager evidence of the international earthquake relief effort here.

Surprisingly, the strongest indicators of international aid presence are the words of this man, Dantali Shah, the village head here in Kakray. "We are so happy for the help of America-- please don't be afraid of us. We welcome any more aid the Americans can offer."

Traditionally, distrust of outsiders, especially from the West, runs high here. It was in this region that the armies of Alexander the Great were finally stalled, and British colonial forces left the area as a buffer against the Russians after repeated efforts to subdue the local Pashtun warriors failed. In recent years villages like this one have periodically caught the attention of the American press when uncorroborated reports of Al-Qaeda leaders hiding out in the area come across the wires. Before the earthquake any Westerner in these parts would have been met with hostility and likely be suspected as a CIA agent, not without good reason.

But now an American like me is welcomed here for a glass of rose water and some intense conversation.

"It was our fate that the earthquake happened, but it was Allah's will that the Americans would help us," Shah told me, "We don't care for the acts of governments. If you respect us then even if our leaders asked us to hurt you we would not do it."

Pakistan is typical of Islamic countries in that the domestic NGO sector is thin, and works mostly for government advocacy, rather than direct service to people in need. Couple this with a government that spends more than 80% of its total budget on the military, and

the job of caring for the poor and disaster-affected is left mostly in the hands of Muslim charities.

The earthquake offered the West a valuable inroad into this area, and in the immediate aftermath American response was impressive. Funds from USAID and the Department of Defense, coupled with donations from private citizens brought \$310 million for disaster relief in this region.

But the work that remains to be done here is huge and only a fraction of this initial funding has been pledged for the coming years. Permanent schools and houses remain to be rebuilt, medical aid is still lacking, and families traumatized by the scope of the destruction and the loss of loved ones need psychological help to get their lives back to normal.

Even after all that work is done, a humanitarian American presence in this area would still be welcome to help bring these people out of poverty and improve their economic prospects. The men in Kakray told me that they were very interested in developing their village, but were quick to point out that modernization did not have to mean Westernization.

“We know that nowadays everything is done with computers,” a young man told me, though he admitted he had never seen one, “We want to bring these kind of modern things into our lives, but we will use them to emphasize Islam, not to gain exposure to Western culture.”

Considering the failure of massive American military and intelligence expenditures to bring significant results in winning the War on Terror, isn't it time to consider an alternative strategy?

By diverting even a small fraction of our military budget to aid projects we could start winning friends where we are currently failing to vanquish enemies. Better still, by putting American NGOs and American volunteers willing to cooperate with locals on the ground in places like North West Frontier Province we could forge powerful personal international ties with conservative Muslims and offer a human challenge to the image of the morally corrupt, power hungry American that is typically accepted in these communities.

This Arms vs. Aid debate is not new, and in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake many analysts astutely pointed out the opportunity it provided us to make friends in this part of the world. We should be proud of the scope of our initial disaster relief efforts in Pakistan, but now that the earthquake has long since left the headlines, we must not forget value of a committed and sustainable humanitarian presence in these areas.

My hosts in Kakray assured me that Americans are now welcome in their village. We should appreciate this hospitality while it lasts and do all we can to foster it in the future. It might be a vital resource in the effort to keep us safe at home.