

The Washington Post

Study: Aid after 2005 quake won trust in Pakistan

By CHRIS BRUMMITT
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ISLAMABAD -- The influx of foreign aid after the 2005 Kashmir earthquake significantly increased survivors' trust in the West, according to new research that also suggests hard-line Islamist charities did little to help despite the publicity they generated.

The research is one of the first empirical studies of the effect of foreign emergency relief in Pakistan. It also raises questions about whether the ongoing U.S. relief mission for the victims of this summer's devastating floods in the country could also alter Pakistani perceptions about America.

In short: Does helping out people in a crisis make them like you?

U.S. officials have cited humanitarian reasons for helping out after the floods, but have also acknowledged the possible strategic benefits of winning friends in Pakistan, a U.S. ally but one where support for Islamist extremists runs deep and anti-American sentiment is never far from the surface.

The United States has long been unpopular in Pakistan, but the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan led to new anger. As well as distrust of U.S. motives in Afghanistan, many Pakistanis do not like what they say is

Washington's support for Israel at the expense of the Palestinian people and Washington's past support for military dictators in Pakistan. Regular American missile strikes against militant targets in the northwest are also often cited as a reason.

The presence of Islamist relief groups in the flood zone has also attracted attention, with officials in both the U.S. and Pakistan expressing concern they may gain recruits on the back of the disaster. Others have said the groups are not reaching enough people to have much of an effect on their support levels.

Washington spends many millions of dollars on humanitarian missions in the Muslim world each year, but there has been surprisingly little research on the efforts. With al-Qaida and other extremists like the Pakistani Taliban pumping out daily

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propaganda about alleged American barbarity, demonstrating otherwise has immense strategic value for Washington.

Some experts doubt that foreign aid does much to help perceptions of America, much less make a lasting change. They often argue that anti-American sentiment is simply too entrenched in Pakistan and Afghanistan to be eroded by charity alone.

"There was skepticism and that is why we wanted to test it," said Tahir Andrabi, professor of economics at Pomona College in California and the co-author of the research.

"We came up with a conclusion that aid did affect hearts and minds in Kashmir, and significantly. I don't think these people will forget," said Andrabi, who shared the study with The Associated Press before it was made public.

The paper will be presented at the University of California and the Center for Global Development in Washington later this month. It was funded by grants from the World Bank, the National Academy of Sciences and the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan.

The magnitude-7.6 earthquake struck Oct. 8, 2005, killing more than 70,000 people, destroying more than 600,000 homes, 6,500 schools, 800 clinics and hospitals, and more than 3,700 miles (5,900 kilometers) of road.

Pledges of aid from abroad totaled \$6.7

billion, with at least \$200 million coming from the United States.

Within days, aid groups from all over Pakistan and the world had arrived in the remote, mountainous region, treating the injured, digging out survivors from flattened buildings and providing food and emergency shelter. In the ensuing months, relief gave way to reconstruction, most of which has now finished.

The United States gave one of the largest and quickest responses. As it is doing in the floods, the U.S. military provided heavy-lift helicopters to ferry supplies and rescue stranded people. It also established a fully staffed army field hospital.

Andrabi spent two weeks training a team of 70 researchers before dispatching them to Kashmir last year. They surveyed 28,000 households in 126 randomly selected villages in four rural districts of Kashmir affected by

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the quake. They were asked what aid groups they remember coming and other general questions.

Around 2,800 of them were chosen for a much more detailed questionnaire on trust in foreigners, ability of different races to work together and other topics. Polls by the respected Pew Research Center typically question about 2,000 people in Pakistan for a national survey.

Andrabi linked his data to where people lived in relation to the fault line, where there was more destruction and hence more international aid groups helping out. The research clearly shows that people's trust in foreigners increases the closer they lived to the fault.

Since peoples' homes were randomly distributed in relation to the fault line, differences in attitudes to foreigners in the area could be attributed entirely to the effect of the earthquake and not to any other characteristics, such as wealth or class.

More than 60 percent of people living on or very close to the fault line said they trusted foreigners - specifically European and Americans - compared with just over 20 percent who lived 40 miles (60 kilometers) away. Trust in fellow villagers remained more or less the same regardless of proximity to the fault line, showing its increase was not a generalized response to the disaster.

The research shows that less than 5 percent of quake survivors reported receiving any help from Islamist charities, regardless of where they were in relation to the fault. Closest to the fault line, 80 percent said the Pakistani army helped them, while 40 percent reported receiving assistance from foreigners and the United Nations.

"The militants were a tiny fraction of who came. Nobody remembers them, that's for sure, while everybody remembers everybody else," Andrabi said. "The scope and capacity of these organizations remains limited."

Andrabi's work did not attempt to ask whether Pakistanis as a whole regard America more kindly as a result of its leading role in the quake response. A nationwide opinion poll taken afterward suggested the U.S. approval rating had gone up slightly, but months later it had dropped again.

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poll, nearly six in 10 Pakistanis described the U.S. as an enemy and only one in 10 called it a partner. Those figures give an idea of the scale of the problem facing Washington as it seeks to convince Pakistan it is on its side.

Floods this summer killed at least 1,600 people and affected a massive swath of the country. An estimated 1 million homes have been damaged or destroyed, five times as many as were hit by this year's earthquake in Haiti.

The U.N. has received \$310 million toward its initial appeal, although private and bilateral donations bring the global total committed for Pakistan flood aid to roughly \$1.1 billion. The United States has so far given at least \$200 million, and U.S. troops have delivered tons of food and other supplies by helicopter in the volatile Swat Valley.

"Experience shows that Pakistani public opinion becomes favorably disposed toward the U.S. when it is seen as caring about Pakistani concerns," said Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's ambassador to the United States. "Even if anti-U.S. media commentators do not change, it is unlikely that a poor farmer will not be touched by the kindness of an American Marine saving his family or serving them halal meals from Chinook helicopters."

Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that U.S. assistance to mostly Muslim Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami had helped America's image there,

and he was hoping for a similar effect in Pakistan.

"That's not why we do it, but the possibility is there. I'm hopeful that many Pakistani citizens can see a different side of America than what is often portrayed," he said recently.

Nadeem Ahmed, head of Pakistan's National Disaster Management Authority, said U.S. aid after the earthquake in Kashmir had a "big impact" on perceptions there because it was a relatively small area. But he had his doubts about the effects of the flood aid.

"This time the area is so huge that the United States has just gotten lost in it," Ahmed said. "I frankly don't see the impact as a strong as it was during the earthquake."

Andrew Wilder, director of Afghanistan and Pakistan programs at the U.S. Institute of Peace who has also studied the earthquake

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and the effect of U.S. aid programs in Afghanistan, said he had not seen Andrabi's findings and would wait to comment on them. He has previously said he doubted that foreign aid to Kashmir did much for America's standing in Pakistan.

He also was skeptical that its role in the flood response would do much, either.

"The United States has given a lot of aid to Pakistan over the years, but there seems to be no correlation between the amounts of aid given and the perception of America," he said. "I'd like to see the U.S. contributing more, but we should not be doing it on the basis of the assumption that Pakistanis will like us more. The risks are we will be disappointed."

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