Pakistan: Study shows appreciation for US disaster aid

A survey of Pakistanis living near the worst-hit areas of 2005 earthquake finds enduring positive attitudes toward foreigners, including Americans.

Washington —
Is all that foreign aid flowing into Pakistan in the aftermath of last month's massive floods changing the way Pakistanis feel about the West, and in particular the United States?

Public opinion surveys conducted in Pakistan in the past have suggested that the country's very low opinion of Westerners and Americans in particular doesn't improve much as a result of sudden foreign largesse in response to a natural disaster.

But a new study plumbing the views of more than 28,000 households in 126 villages in the part of Pakistan devastated by a massive earthquake in 2005 finds that attitudes toward foreigners, including Americans, shifted significantly to the positive and in an enduring manner as a result of assistance from abroad.

"What we found is that trust in foreigners changes in response to action," says Tahir Andrabi, a political economist at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., who organized the study with Jishnu Das, a World Bank research economist. "The big picture from our work says that what you do on the ground as a country and a people really does matter."

Debate over the impact of foreign aid and what role it plays in improving America's image abroad has bubbled ever since the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing national probing around the theme of "Why do they hate us?" Surveys showed that opinions of America improved sharply among Indonesians after significant US assistance flowed in following the 2004 tsunami. But similar polls in Pakistan suggested that minor improvements in America's rock-bottom image after the 2005 earthquake were soon lost.

Subsequent surveys of Pakistani opinion also have suggested no lasting improvement in views of the US and Americans. The
question is resurfacing once again in the wake of the summer's centennial floods and the significant assistance the US has provided.

At a ministerial meeting at the United Nations in New York Sunday, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton announced that the US has provided about $345 million in what was initially rescue and emergency aid efforts and which has now shifted to relief and early recovery work. The American military was involved in the rescue of more than 15,000 people and in delivering more than 7 million pounds of food and other supplies, she said.

In particular, a Pakistan Relief Fund created especially for individual Americans to make $10 donations over their cell phones has brought in $2 million, Secretary Clinton said. That sum will be matched by Proctor and Gamble and will go towards new water purification projects in flood-stricken areas.

Not only is such assistance appreciated, but Mr. Andrabi found in his study that affected populations remember who provided assistance – and retain a positive image of foreigners because of it – years after the disaster. Andrabi and the World Bank’s Mr. Das carried out their study in 2009, four years after the earthquake.

“What really struck me is that the image of foreigners remained so positive in many of these households a considerable length of time after the disaster, and also over a period that included things that tarnished Westerners’ image generally in Pakistan,” he adds. Such harmful factors include the controversy over the Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad, the growing use of US drones in Pakistan in targeted attacks on Taliban leaders, and rising terrorist violence across the country that many Pakistanis attribute to stepped-up US involvement in domestic issues.

In particular, Andrabi’s study finds that trust of foreigners rose higher the closer people lived to the quake’s fault line, while the level of trust in national institutions did not vary over the wider quake-effected region. That suggests to Andrabi that the concentration of foreign assistance in the most devastated areas – often in places where few foreigners had traveled before – was retained by locals as a positive expression of global concern. Previous polling of Pakistani attitudes sought to reflect national views.

The Andrabi survey shows that while the affected populations understood that the US and other foreign countries were operating from a mix of motivations, most people did not see the assistance as “a cynical attempt by Americans to win hearts and minds,” Andrabi says.

“Hillary Clinton speaks about a ‘shared humanity’ that is behind the US relief effort, and I think most people see it that way,” he says. “People are smart enough to understand that America has multiple faces, we all do,” he adds. “But what they seem to have concluded is that the basic motivation is human.”

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