

## Millions Homeless in Pakistan as Winter Approaches; Still Awaiting International Response

“It was with deep sadness that I learned of yesterday’s earthquake in South Asia, which caused such great damage and loss of life in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan . . . **I pray that the international community will be swift and generous in its response to the disaster** and I ask the Lord to grant courage and strength to those involved in the task of rescue work and reconstruction. . .

Pope Benedict XVI at St. Peter’s Square, Oct. 9, 2005

On October 8, 2005, a 7.6 magnitude earthquake shook South Asia. The Pakistani-controlled region of Kashmir (a disputed territory with control split between India and Pakistan) and northeastern Pakistan were badly hit. India and Afghanistan were also impacted.

**The death toll is rising.** The official death toll in the Pakistani area was over 56,000 as of October 30, 2005. Many local officials believe the number to be higher, closer to 80,000. Relief workers say that the death toll may rise even higher if the necessary aid does not arrive.

**Health care and medical supplies are lacking.** Many hospitals have been destroyed and medical supplies are limited. Yet, at least 75,000 people are estimated to have been severely injured by the quake. Many of these people have contracted infections due to lack of timely medical care, and limbs that could have been saved will now have to be amputated.

**At least 3 million people are homeless** in the the affected Pakistani areas. Many of them still lack tents and shelter, despite the approach of winter. In addition, many of the earthquake victims are in mountain villages that are difficult for rescue workers to access.

On October 28, **the UN warned that it would soon run**



BBC News, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/4321490.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4321490.stm)

**out of aid money** and be forced to ground helicopters delivering earthquake relief supplies unless donors can provide the funds needed to continue the rescue operation. One major problem is that most aid pledged so far is for long-term reconstruction instead of short-term emergency relief. On October 26, rich countries pledged \$580 million for the relief effort, but only \$16 million was for immediate relief. The United Nations said this is just a fifth of what it needs to get through the next few weeks in Pakistan.

On October 26, 2005, the U.S. had raised its pledge to assist Pakistan from \$50 million to \$156 million. This is in contrast to almost \$63 billion that the U.S. federal government has pledged to Hurricane Katrina relief.

### Take Action

Catholic social teaching calls us to protect the rights of the most poor and vulnerable. Call President Bush and your Congressional representatives to urge them to increase U.S. funding to aid the millions of victims of the earthquake in Pakistan.

White House Comment Line: 202-456-1111  
Congressional Switchboard: 1-800-839-5276



## Why So Devastating?

It is no secret that disasters of similar nature and size cause more deaths in poor countries than in rich ones. In fact, about 95 percent of deaths caused by disasters occur in poor countries.

One reason for this is that buildings and infrastructure in developing countries are much weaker and less “earthquake resistant” than in developed countries. While it is impossible to make buildings fully earthquake resistant, they can be made much safer. Developed countries have the means to do so and can therefore better mitigate the death and destruction that results from earthquakes.

Sometimes improving building structure can be done at costs to governments that are not too high. *The Economist* reports that in India, for example, building more earthquake-resistant housing would only add 2-4% to construction costs. However, even this small increase is burdensome to many poor people in regions like Kashmir, who pay for their own housing materials and will choose the cheapest option. People in remote areas may also not have access to the best materials. As a result, housing in developing countries is often not “earthquake-resistant.” This is also true for many public buildings, such as hospitals, in developing countries. Poor governments often perform a cost-benefit analysis and choose not to build with the highest quality materials, in order that the buildings can be built at the lowest cost possible.

Partially as a result of this type of low-cost building (in addition to factors such as population density and living in an earthquake-prone region), many earthquake victims in Kashmir and Pakistan were buried and killed when houses collapsed. Others were severely wounded. Because hospitals were also built with inadequate infrastructure and were destroyed, many victims are now dying from gangrene and other infections caused by unattended wounds.

People in developing countries may also live on steep hillsides and isolated areas because they cannot afford safe land. These factors make the effects of a disaster like an earthquake more devastating. After a disaster like an earthquake occurs, poor people also do not have insurance to rebuild their homes after. Their governments are often lacking resources for disaster relief and cannot provide sufficient assistance to individuals. Governments also usually cannot afford to rebuild

public buildings, such as hospitals, in disaster-resistant ways, leaving the buildings prone to destruction in the next disaster.

Unfortunately, future disasters in Pakistan and Kashmir are likely to occur. Across the Himalayas, there exists what seismologists call a “slip deficit,” or an area in which a lack of past earthquakes in an earthquake-prone area builds up stress, often having devastating effects when the stress is finally released. Roger Bilham, of the University of Colorado, says that the Pakistan-Kashmir earthquake released only a tenth of the energy that still needs to be released. So, more earthquakes, probably of a magnitude of 8.0 or more, can be expected.

Clearly, an investment in government and international assistance to both individuals and governments in poor countries like Pakistan for creating more earthquake-resistant houses and public buildings like hospitals, could save many lives in the future.

Source: “Why the Kashmir Earthquake Happened and What Might be Done,” *The Economist*, October 13, 2005.

God,

We feel blessed to watch Winter come through the windows of our warm, heated homes, where we sip tea, wrapped in a quilt.

We cannot imagine the Pakistani mother and child, who sit outside their broken home, now a rock pile, and who shiver, shaken and broken, praying and longing for food and blankets, while the biting wind numbs toes and fingers.

We pray for those in the earthquake zone who are suffering from the cold, from illness, or from the death of a loved one, for those who are leading relief efforts, and for a spirit of generosity between countries.

We ask you, Father of all, to move us to speak for the poor and vulnerable in our midst and across the world. Help us to challenge our leaders to offer funds or donate generously to alleviate the suffering of your children in Pakistan.  
Amen.

