

Natural Disasters and Human Rights: Comparing Responses to Haiti and Pakistan

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Presentation at Center for Human Rights and International Justice, Boston College
3 November 2010

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about natural disasters and human rights with a particular focus on international responses to Haiti and Pakistan. I'd like to begin with 4 general statements about natural disasters and human rights, then give a brief overview comparing the response to the two disasters but spend most of my time talking about some of the larger issues – ethical issues if you will – raised by the comparison between these two responses.

General comments:

1. Disasters aren't so natural. I'm using the term natural disasters as a sort of short-hand for the more accurate but more awkward phrase 'disasters resulting from natural hazards.' In reality, disasters are almost always the result of both natural phenomena and human action. For example, mudslides increase in Nepal as a result of both glacier runoff (a natural cause) and deforestation (a man-made cause). We could take this a step further and ask to what extent was the breaching of the levees in New Orleans the result of Hurricane Katrina or the failure of US authorities to take preventive actions to protect its citizens?
2. There have always been natural disasters of course, but they are increasing in severity and intensity as a result of climate change. And yet the reality is that the international humanitarian system is not prepared to cope with more than one large-scale disaster a year.
3. Disasters always hurt the poor and marginalized more than others. The poor tend to live in less sturdy housing and on marginal land. Similarly while disasters in developed countries tend to have high economic costs, they generally result in lower casualties than those taking place in developing societies. For example, in August 2010, New Zealand had an earthquake measuring over 7.0 on the Richter scale which destroyed 100,000 homes. No one was killed. Recovery is faster in wealthier countries. Access to assistance is often more readily available and the delivery of that assistance is easier with paved roads and multiple communication networks. The spread of disease is less likely when medicine is on hand, sanitation can be addressed, and functioning hospitals are nearby.
4. Assistance is not neutral. In fact, sometimes the response itself can exacerbate inequities. The way in which a government responds to natural disasters is often politically motivated and almost always has political consequences. If aid is not distributed in an impartial fashion, ethnic, class or religious resentments and conflicts can intensify.

Points of comparison between Haiti and Pakistan¹

1. These were two megadisasters. The floods in Pakistan affected more people (20.1 million) in comparison with the Haitian earthquake (3 million), but a smaller percentage of the overall population (12% of Pakistan's total population was directly affected in comparison with almost

¹ Elizabeth Ferris, *Earthquakes and Floods: Comparing Haiti and Pakistan*, Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, 26 August 2010, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2010/0826_earthquakes_floods_ferris/0826_earthquakes_floods_ferris.pdf

30% of Haiti's population.)² Earthquakes and floods each have their own particular dynamics. Earthquakes happen suddenly and create lots of horrific injuries. Floods, at least as occurred in Pakistan, happen over time and typically do not cause large numbers of injuries.

2. Both countries are poor countries, but Haiti is poorer. GDP per capita in Haiti is about \$733, in Pakistan it is \$1017. On the Human Development Index, Haiti ranks 160 out of 180 and Pakistan ranks 141. The amount of economic damage in both cases was huge: \$7.8 billion in Haiti, \$9.7 billion in Pakistan, but while this amount represents 119% of Haiti's GDP, it is 'only' 5.8% of Pakistan's GDP.
3. In both cases, the international humanitarian system launched appeals for emergency funding and attracted considerable resources. But almost twice as much money has been raised for Haiti (\$3.3 billion) in comparison with Pakistan (\$1.6 billion). The US has contributed twice as much to Haiti as to Pakistan (\$1.165 billion for Haiti in comparison with \$482 million for Pakistan). Some of this difference may be due to the fact that the Haitian earthquake occurred 7 months before the Pakistani floods and it takes time for governments to commit funds. But that doesn't explain the great difference between the initial response of private individuals and organizations who contributed about \$1.24 billion for Haiti in comparison with Pakistan where only \$292 million was raised. Or to look at it another way, donations per affected person received after 2 weeks of the flash appeal were an average of \$157 per affected Haitian in comparison with \$15 per affected Pakistani.

There are many other points of comparison that can be made between the two and I'm happy to talk further about the similarities and differences, but I'd like to step back from the immediate comparisons and talk about some of the broader issues raised by the response to these two disasters – issues which are as much about ethics as about politics.

Why do some disasters attract more international support than others?

A basic humanitarian principle is that assistance should be given on the basis of need alone and yet there are huge differences in the international response to disasters. For example, about \$7000 was raised for each victim of the 2004 tsunami versus \$3 for each victim of severe flooding the same year in Bangladesh.³

Two weeks after the disasters in Haiti and Pakistan, 10 times more money was raised per victim of the Haitian earthquake than for a victim of the Pakistani floods. What explains the disparity? Part of it is undoubtedly that the media provided more print and broadcast coverage of Haiti than Pakistan. The fact that an earthquake occurs in an instant – versus the slowly-rising waters of the Pakistan flood –

² All statistics are taken from: Elizabeth Ferris, *Earthquakes and Floods: Comparing Haiti and Pakistan*, Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, 26 August 2010, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2010/0826_earthquakes_floods_ferris/0826_earthquakes_floods_ferris.pdf

³ Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, *Synthesis Report: Expanded Summary Joint evaluation of the international response to the Indian Ocean tsunami*, January 2007, http://www.alnap.org/pool/files/Syn_Report_Sum.pdf, p. 39

creates a more dramatic focal point. And casualties were much lower in Pakistan than in Haiti. There are other reasons as well: Haiti is also geographically closer to the US, has a large diaspora in the US and Canada, and has been the site of humanitarian and development work by NGOs for years.

These are all possible reasons, but I wonder if other factors weren't also in play. Perhaps people didn't contribute to Pakistani flood relief because of concerns with corruption. Yet while Pakistan doesn't have a very good record on corruption, Haiti ranks even lower on the 2009 *Corruption Perception Index* (ranking 160 out of 180 in comparison to Pakistan's 139). My sense is that most Americans know little about either the Preval government in Haiti or the Zadari government in Pakistan, but there seems to be a perception that Pakistan is mixed up with al-Qaeda, the war in Afghanistan, and that it somehow is linked to Islamic extremism.

This raises questions about who is seen as deserving of international assistance. For example, are poor Haitians deemed as more needy than poor Pakistanis? Or is the difference due to our perception that Haiti is somehow in 'our' neighborhood and thus more deserving of our support than Pakistan (which is an Islamic country and therefore other Islamic governments should take the lead)? Or is the difference due to the fact that the media interspersed coverage of the Pakistani floods with stories about the conflict and suicide bombings?

Related to this is the question of why the public tends to respond more generously to those affected by natural disasters than to those affected by war. While there has been an outpouring of support for victims of at least some natural disasters such as Haiti and Pakistan, there isn't the same generous response to say, Somalia, or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Do we somehow 'blame' those affected by conflict in ways that we don't for those affected by a hurricane? Or is it that we can more easily identify with those affected by disasters because after all, natural disasters could happen to us?

What does disaster-affected mean?

Obviously people who lose their lives or are injured, those who are displaced from their communities or lose their homes or possessions are affected by a disaster. But the phrase 'disaster-affected' is a bit ambiguous. The Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT), created in 1998 by the WHO Collaborating Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) defines the affected population as "People requiring immediate assistance during a period of emergency, i.e. requiring basic survival needs such as food, water, shelter, sanitation and immediate medical assistance."⁴ But this doesn't capture the range of those affected by a disaster. One of the few efforts to unpack the term 'disaster-affected' comes from the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), which defines 'affected population' as those persons suffering as a result of the natural disaster and suggests three groupings:

"The **primary** population suffers the **direct effects** of the disaster and can be found in the direct path of the natural disaster. The impact on this group includes death, homelessness, injury, and trauma.

The **secondary** population suffers the **indirect effects** of the disaster and can be found in or near the path of the disaster. These persons may include, care givers who were not directly affected and family members who take in relatives as a result of the disaster.

⁴ WHO Collaborating Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), Emergency Events Database, Glossary, <http://www.emdat.be/glossary/9>

The **tertiary** population can be found outside of the disaster zone but may be affected. These persons may suffer injury or other damages due to panic, loss of social services, or any other severe disruption or inconvenience due to disaster.”⁵

Let’s think about this for a minute. In Haiti, an estimated 220,500 people were killed and an additional 300,000 were injured while the corresponding figure for Pakistan was less than 2,000 deaths with 3,000 people injured. The number of displaced are around 1.8 million in the case of Haiti – virtually all of whom remain displaced – and perhaps 6 million in Pakistan –most of whom have returned home.⁶ (The NDNA estimates that 70% of flood-affected families in Sindh Province remain displaced.⁷) Those who are displaced from their homes have particular needs – obviously for shelter, but also for documentation and provision of basic services – a theme to which I’ll return in a minute.

What about the secondary and tertiary populations affected by the disaster? Secondary populations are those in the region where the disaster occurred. This would include Pakistanis who were themselves not directly affected by the disaster but who could not send their children to school because school buildings were being used as temporary shelters for people displaced by the disaster. It would include those who are affected by economic changes resulting from the disaster – and the response to the disaster -- such as price increases for housing and other goods.⁸ There are other indirect effects as well. When UN agencies and international NGOs rush to the scene to respond to the victims of disasters, they need to hire local staff and can usually afford to pay more than local institutions. So a Haitian doctor may choose to work for an international organization providing emergency assistance which can impact the organization he or she previously worked for. Thus a government-run health clinic may face a labor shortage resulting from the arrival of large international relief organizations.

The economic impact of a natural disaster can reach far beyond the immediate area directly affected by the natural hazard. Thus after Hurricane Katrina in the US, prices for home insurance increased and the fall in oil production and refining led to increases in gasoline prices throughout the country. For Pakistan and Haiti, the impact of the disaster is likely to be significant over the long term. In Pakistan if many people can’t tend their fields before the planting season, which is likely to happen in parts of Sindh province, regional and even national food shortages could occur next year. Destruction of cotton fields in Pakistan will also heavily impact the country’s textile industry which accounts for 60% of the country’s exports.⁹ In Haiti, all of the country’s schools were closed for 12 weeks after the earthquake and all Haitians were affected by the postponing of elections. There also may be indirect effects such as fewer resources devoted to regions and issues outside the immediate area affected by the disaster. The loss

⁵ ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean, *Disaster Assessment Training Manual (DATM), Section C1, The affected population,*

<http://www.eclac.org/publicaciones/xml/8/14978/section%20C1%20affected%20population.pdf>

⁶ According to the Government of Pakistan’s National Disaster Management Authority, 98% of displaced people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province and at least 90% of displaced people in Punjab Province have returned home while only 26% of displaced people in Sindh province have returned. USAID, Fact Sheet #2, 15 October 2010.

http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/countries/pakistan/template/fs_sr/fy2011/pakistan_fl_fs02_10-15-2010.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See for example, Associated Press, “\$900,000 for a 3-bedroom...in Haiti?” 17 October 2010.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130629663&ps=cprs>

⁹ Robert Birsell, “Scenarios: Political and economic impact of Pakistan's floods”, Reuters, 15 August 2010,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE67C10Z20100815>

of civil servants in all of the country's ministries has had implications for government services throughout the country.

Much of the focus in disaster response is on those who are displaced. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, for example, there was an outpouring of support for those who went to Texas and other states across the US. In Haiti, international agencies have focused attention on those living in the 1300 or so camps around the country, but there is disturbing evidence that many urban poor are moving into displaced camps in order to receive assistance that is only available there. By targeting assistance to IDPs, the relief effort may be contributing to displacement. In the case of Pakistan, some 2 million people¹⁰ were already displaced from violence in Swat and FATA when the flooding occurred, leading some IDPs to be displaced again. And although it receives little publicity, people are still being displaced by violence in Pakistan – just last month civilians fled bombing in Bajaur agency and fled Orakzai agency as the military planned new military operations there.¹¹

How can the response to a disaster make things worse?

We know that the most vulnerable groups after a natural disaster are often the most invisible. A lot of international agencies have mandates that lead them to look at specific groups: UNICEF focuses on children and women, UNHCR focuses on refugees, for example. These agencies generally do a good job of assisting the groups falling within their mandate. But what about people for whom there isn't an international agency, for example, the elderly or the internally displaced? For example, Roberta Cohen found that when UNICEF was coordinating overall protection efforts, children fared very well, but the agency was less effective in responding to the particular needs of other groups.¹²

Most obviously, the way in which relief is distributed – and particularly when assistance is perceived as discriminatory – can have an impact on conflict. Many observers note that the way assistance was provided seemed to have encouraged the peace process in Aceh, Indonesia while the perception that assistance discriminated against one ethnic group – the Tamils – in Sri Lanka seems to have made the conflict worse. In the case of Pakistan, there are reports of competition over access to assistance, and reports of discrimination against religious minorities. IDMC reported earlier this month that “Karachi, already affected by ethnic violence between member of the Muhajir and Pashtun communities who fled the armed conflict in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as well as sectarian clashes, experienced an influx of hundreds of thousands of flood-displaced Sindhi from the surrounding areas.”¹³

An issue in both Pakistan and Haiti is the role of international agencies vis a vis the national authorities. It is the responsibility of national governments to protect and assist their citizens and others living within their borders. When a major disaster occurs and the ability of the government to carry out those

¹⁰ Reuters/AlertNet, “Pakistan: Flooding worsens situation for people displaced by conflict in north-west”, 6 September 2010, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/IDMC/2d3b646e2085705c7c530b690f1da144.htm>

¹¹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, “News Alert: Pakistan: Armed conflict displaces thousands in FATA; discrimination and violence against displaced minorities endanger Karachi peace”, 7 October 2010, [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004D31AA/\(httpIDPNewsAlerts\)/BC7E9B4DFB137E72C12577B5004796AB?OpenDocument](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004D31AA/(httpIDPNewsAlerts)/BC7E9B4DFB137E72C12577B5004796AB?OpenDocument)

¹² Roberta Cohen, *An institutional gap for disaster IDPs*, Forced Migration Review # 32, April 2009, www.fmreview.org/textOnlyContent/FMR/32/Cohen.doc

¹³ IDMC News Alert, 7 October 2010.

functions is overwhelmed, the international community steps in. Haiti has such a long experience with international NGOs that it is often called, somewhat facetiously, 'the republic of NGOs.' But the fact is that NGOs can have more resources than the government. If governments aren't doing a very good job, there is a tendency for the UN and NGOs to bypass the government. This might assist more people in the short term, but bypassing the government has costs. It can undercut the government and deprive it of needed legitimacy. As Robert Zoellick, president of the World Bank group, said, "Legitimacy must be achieved through performance. It needs to be earned by delivering basic services, especially visible ones. Clean up the garbage. Build institutional capacity by doing things: supplying clean water; sanitation; simple roads to connect territories that may have been cut off from one another; electricity for some part of the day; basic preventative health care such as immunizations."¹⁴ Zoellick goes on to say that to improve legitimacy of the government, it matters who provides the services: "They should be undertaken by the government and local people as soon as feasible."¹⁵

What is the role of politics in humanitarian response?

Governments are not neutral, impartial humanitarian actors but are, by definition, political creatures. Is there anything wrong with using humanitarian assistance in support of foreign policy objectives? Is it OK, for example, for the US government to give more humanitarian relief to Pakistan than to Bangladesh because humanitarian need coincides with its political interests? There is some evidence that Pakistani public opinion of the US popularity improved as a result of US aid to Pakistan in the aftermath of the 2005 earthquake, but that this increase in good will was fleeting.¹⁶

Does it matter who delivers the aid? Does it make any difference to a hungry person that food is distributed by the US or the Pakistani military or by the UN's World Food Program? Within the humanitarian community there has been considerable questioning of military involvement in humanitarian assistance in conflict situations, but much less so about military involvement in natural disasters. Is there a fundamental difference between the US military opening the airport and clearing the port in Haiti on the one hand and, on the other, its role in building schools in the Horn of Africa or distributing assistance in Afghanistan?

The response to these two disasters also raise questions about humanitarian principles, in particular, the principles of independence and neutrality. If an NGO is providing assistance to Haitians or Pakistanis with funds from the US government, is it perceived as an independent humanitarian actor – or seen as part of the US government's response? This question of independence comes up often in conflict situations – particularly in conflicts where the government providing the funds is also a party to the conflict. But sometimes in natural disasters as well, there can be a clear foreign policy objective.

And finally, there is the question of neutrality which is defined by the ICRC as "not [to] take sides in hostilities or "engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature."¹⁷ This is often called into question in humanitarian operations in conflict situations, but not so much in

¹⁴ Robert Zoellick, "Fragile States: Securing Development," Presentation at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Geneva, September 2008, p. 4, available at: www.iiss.org.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁶ CNN News, "In Pakistan floods, U.S. must step into breach", 18 August 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/OPINION/08/17/ballen.flood.pakistan.aid/index.html>

¹⁷ International Red Cross and Crescent Movement, The Seven Fundamental Principles, www.redcross.int/EN/fundprinciples/namibiaseven.asp

situations of natural disasters. But aid is not neutral and the tendency is for humanitarian work to expand – to include not just immediate life-saving assistance, but empowerment, building local capacities, and in some cases supporting free markets and democracy. In the case of natural disasters, the phrase ‘build back better’ has become almost a mantra. For example, in testimony before the US Congress, Andrew Natsios (formerly USAID Administrator) said “as the U.S. transitions from short term humanitarian assistance toward the reconstruction of Haiti’s shattered capital and economy, our aid must alter the power structure within the Haitian government and economy, open the society up to genuine democratic principles and to a free market economy.”¹⁸ But supporting social and economic change is not neutral. Building schools for girls in Pakistan is not uncontroversial.

Concluding Thoughts

It has really only been since the 2004 tsunami that the relationship between human rights and natural disasters has received considerable attention. At the international level, Operational Guidelines on protection and natural disasters were formally adopted by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee in June 2006 and have been recently revised.¹⁹

The Guidelines stress the fact that people do not lose their basic human rights as a result of a natural disaster or their displacement but are entitled to all relevant human rights guaranteed to all residents and citizens. The Operational Guidelines stress that human rights encompass not only civil and political rights but also economic, social and cultural rights. However, in the midst of a disaster, it is often difficult to simultaneously promote all rights for all of those affected. Thus for practical reasons, the Operational Guidelines divide human rights into four groups, namely:

- rights related to physical security and integrity (e.g. protection of the right to life and the right to be free of assault, rape, arbitrary detention, kidnapping, and threats to these rights);
- rights related to basic necessities of life (e.g. the rights to food, drinking water, shelter, adequate clothing, adequate health services, and sanitation);
- rights related to other economic, social and cultural protection needs (e.g. the rights to be provided with or have access to education, to receive restitution or compensation for lost property, and to work); and
- rights related to other civil and political protection needs (e.g. the rights to religious freedom and freedom of speech, personal documentation, political participation, access to courts, and freedom from discrimination).

The Operational Guidelines suggest that the first two groups of rights may be the most relevant during the emergency, life-saving phase. Thus in the initial disaster response, it is usually more important to ensure adequate access to water than to provide replacement identity cards to those displaced. However, the guidelines insist that only the full respect of all four groups of rights can ensure adequate protection of those affected by natural disasters, including those who are displaced.²⁰

¹⁸ Andrew Natsios, *After the Earthquake: Empowering Haiti to Rebuild Better – Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, Center for Global Development, 20 May 2010, <http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/1424157>

¹⁹ IASC, *Protecting Persons Affected by Natural Disasters: IASC Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters*, Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, 2006, available: http://www.brookings.edu/projects/idp/2006_naturaldisasters.aspx. The Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement also developed a draft manual on the Operational Guidelines to provide more concrete guidance to disaster responders and is currently being revised in light of experiences in the field, available: http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2008/spring_natural_disasters.aspx.

²⁰ IASC, *Operational Guidelines*, *op.cit.* p. 7.

Responding to people affected by natural disasters – whether the horrific earthquake in Haiti or the devastating floods in Pakistan – bring up issues of human rights as well as logistics, ethics as well as politics. People need to be protected and assisted. As the international community struggles to prepare for coming disasters, these questions will become even more important in the future.