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Pakistan Earthquake

Solidarity after the earthquake

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On October 8, 2005 Pakistani-controlled Kashmir suffered its worst earthquake in more than a century. The North West Frontier Province was also badly affected, although to a lesser extent, as was Indian-controlled Kashmir.

As this article is being written, the Pakistani Prime Minister's official estimate of victims runs to more than 53,000 dead (40,000 in Kashmir and 13,000 in the frontier province), 67,000 wounded and 3.3 million made homeless. What are the real figures and will they ever be known?

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/0_17.jpg]

The information on the situation in the affected zones remains piecemeal. The big international media rarely leave Islamabad (Pakistan's capital) and Muzaffarabad (the capital of Pakistani-controlled Kashmir). Coverage of the event is much less than that of the tsunami of December 2004. The latter certainly concerned a much wider area and access to the affected areas of Kashmir is difficult, but it's hard to avoid thinking that the absence of tourist complexes in a region on a war footing the Indo-Pakistani face-off along the "line of control" accounts for something in this difference in media treatment.

People abandoned

Ten days after the earthquake, the situation of the surviving villagers in the affected zones remains dramatic. They have to reach the urban centres on foot (sometimes involving journeys of 24 or 48 hours) as winter looms, with rain, snow and night frost nocturne. Severely wounded people have often spent a week without care before being transported to medical units. A number have died while awaiting help.

The UN administration has said that the country "desperately" needed helicopters. Indeed, there is a plethora in this ultra-militarized region (Afghanistan is an hour's flight away) but they have been apportioned with an eyedropper.

The inhabitants of New Orleans have already paid a high price for the imperial priorities of their government, with the public funds destined for the upkeep of the levees being spent on the Iraqi occupation. Now it is Kashmir's turn. Its territory is only considered as a strategic cul-de-sac which does not merit the broad mobilization of resources that mountain rescue requires.

Another parallel. As had been the case on the coasts of the Indian Ocean, solidarity between poor and ordinary people began to operate well before government aid slowly arrived.

Responding to the criticisms, the president of Pakistan, general Pervez Musharraf, said that he could not be expected to respond better than George Bush during hurricane Katrina, given that the latter was the head of the richest country in the world.

But behind the self-absolution of heads of state, we can sense the same indifference towards the poor; whether in New Orleans or Kashmir, they are literally "invisible" in the eyes of the powerful.

In an article intended to absolve the Pakistani government, the Lahore "Daily Times" expressed this social blindness

in striking fashion. The big cities were only marginally affected, so the newspaper claims that “Pakistan has suffered relatively light damage” compared to other earthquakes.

Entire villages have been swept from the map, the death count will perhaps exceed 100,000. The percentage of victims in relation to the total population is often particularly high. In Muzaffargarh - a capital! - 70% of housing has been destroyed. Around 90% of the town of Balakot has been destroyed. But it's in Kashmir...

It is obviously difficult to protect oneself against a powerful earthquake, but it would be interesting to know what resources have been devoted to protecting housing and infrastructure (roads and so on) against quakes (because everyone knows that the drama will happen again one day, as the Indian and Eurasian continental shelves clash with the Himalayan foothills). One fears that the answer is none, in rural Kashmir at least.

As for the army, it controls the state and a significant part of the economy. Yet in this high-risk country, “it has no training in crisis management, and as it has absolute control over everything and directs the civil administration, you have the worst scenario” notes a functionary of the International Crisis Group quoted in “Le Monde” on October 15, 2005.

Cancel the debt!

Some small western medical and military teams have been sent to the north of the country. The Pakistani president has called for international financial aid. The World Bank has offered 20 million dollars and the Asian Development Bank 10 million.

But as the French Committee for the Cancellation of the Third World Debt (CADTM) has pointed out, “these figures should not hide the fact that at the same time, rich countries and multilateral institutions continue cynically to receive much higher sums from the Pakistani state in repayment of a debt which has become illegitimate.

In 2003, Pakistan paid its rich creditors around 2.5 billion dollars, of which more than 500 million dollars went to the World Bank and 600 million dollars to the IMF”. “Moreover” CADTM says, “the structural adjustment policies imposed by these institutions piloted by the leaders of the rich countries, with the complicity of general Musharraf, deprives the state of the resources to face up to this terrible catastrophe, eroding the health services, in prevention and emergency services notably.

Indeed, the debt has already been repaid several times: Pakistan has repaid more than 5 times what it owed in 1980 but it is 3.5 times more indebted”.

One of the most urgent solidarity measures, concludes CADTM, should be the “total and immediate cancellation of Pakistan's public foreign debt and the abandonment of the structural adjustment policies which favour international investors and big companies to the detriment of the people in distress. We should prevent this earthquake from multiplying the tragic effects of debt and poverty”

Pakistani movements

Given the incompetence of the administration, numerous initiatives have been taken by Pakistani or international

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NGOs, trade union associations, parties and diverse organizations. The Islamic fundamentalist currents are also mobilising their networks and hope to strengthen their implantation on this occasion; some see the earthquake as a punishment from God.

Our association, Europe solidaire sans frontières (ESSF), has decided to support the Labour Education Foundation which is establishing aid camps in the regions affected, in collaboration with the Women Workers Help Line network, the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF) and the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP). We think that it is important for the social movement in the west to prioritise support for the efforts of Pakistani organisations rather than international ones (to strengthen the local associative tissue) and notably those which develop solidarity in a secular and progressive direction, genuinely independent of the state powers.

The LEF has collected more than 5,000 dollars in cash and goods, which has allowed it to send three lorry loads of aid to the emergency camps with food, tents, blankets and so on. It should be able to count on international solidarity.

Please visit Labour Education Foundation website for more details of Labour Relief Campaign www.lef.org.pk

Donations can be sent to the Labour Education Foundation appeal in two ways:

To Pakistan, but which might be very costly:

LABOUR EDUCATION FOUNDATION

A/C No. 01801876

BANK ALFALAH LTD., LDA PLAZA, KASHMIR ROAD, LAHORE, PAKISTAN

Route:

Please advise and pay to Citi Bank, New York, USA Swift CITI US 33

for onward transfer to BANK ALFALAH LTD., KARACHI, PAKISTAN A/C No. 36087144

and for final transfer to BANK ALFALAH LTD., LDA PLAZA, KASHMIR ROAD, LAHORE, PAKISTAN

Swift: ALFHPKKALDA for A/C No. 01801876 OF LABOUR EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Or through the Paris-based ESSF, which is centralising the transfer of funds:

THROUGH ESSF:

Bank Account:

Crédit lyonnais

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Agence de la Croix-de-Chavaux (00525)

10 boulevard de Chanzy

93100 Montreuil

France

International bank account details :

IBAN : FR85 3000 2005 0044 5757 C12

BIC / SWIFT : CRLYFRPP

Account holder : ESSF