

Religious aftershock: Earthquake relief in Pakistan

by [Paul Jeffrey](#) in the [September 19, 2006](#) issue

New fault lines are complicating the already daunting challenge of recovering from last October's killer earthquake in the Himalayan foothills of northern Pakistan. As tens of thousands of survivors brace for the coming winter, relief groups are caught in a religious squeeze play that makes recovery and reconstruction even more difficult.

The massive quake seemed to do the most damage in communities where conservative Islamic culture holds tremendous power over people's daily lives. In these places, women pass their days secluded from public life, and fundamentalist jihadi groups have found fertile ground for recruitment. Many of these groups are officially banned by the government because of their links to terrorism. But President Pervez Musharraf, who is already contending with armed insurgencies in several other areas, has chosen not to enforce antiterror laws in the quake zone.

The independent International Crisis Group recently claimed that the government's tolerance of the banned groups has "empowered extremists" and could "further undermine the prospects of democratization in Pakistan."

Yet the jihadi groups were empowered precisely because they were present in many rural communities at the time of the quake and responded to its victims days before the government showed up. In some areas they form the backbone of civil society, and the credibility earned by their prompt and efficient quake response has emboldened them. "They've reestablished themselves after being on the run," says Marvin Pervez, director of the Afghanistan/Pakistan program of Church World Service (CWS). "They saw this as a public relations opportunity, a time to get new recruits. They're very present today, operating hospitals, putting up billboards. They're in your face."

The fortified activists have made life difficult for Western relief agencies, which have always had to work with sensitivity in this Islamic republic. Nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs) operating in the quake zone have security officers who hang around mosques on Fridays to listen to the preaching of fundamentalist leaders, a few of whom have issued fatwas saying that it is acceptable to rape a foreign NGO woman in order to save her honor and eliminate the threat she represents to the community. Weeks after the Danish cartoon controversy died down, new controversy erupted as jihadists singled out Oxfam and CWS as corrupters of women. The Pakistani military has responded by providing armed escorts to foreign NGO staff in several remote areas.

Gender issues often trigger conflict, and the social dislocation of the quake, which forced many women out of private home environments into public camps, has exacerbated this. While displaced men rushed to return to their former homes, displaced women were more reluctant, preferring to linger a bit longer in the freedom they had discovered in the otherwise horrible tent cities.

Even in the best of times, Western aid groups walk a difficult line between respecting local tradition and culture (a basic principle of humanitarian response) and fully incorporating women into local emergency response and relief programs. Now they risk antagonizing conservative leaders when they inquire about women's needs. The agencies have had to try creative approaches. According to Gul Wali Khan, emergency director in Pakistan for Catholic Relief Services, his agency tends to hire only "mature women," whose faces supposedly won't tempt men to impure thoughts. CRS also hires couples, even if all the man does is tag along to provide cover for the woman staffer.

CWS's Pervez insists that respecting local culture isn't the same as submitting to male religious leaders who have imposed strict control on women. "What you see today in Pakistan wasn't here until the '70s. We were a much more progressive country. Women used to drive buses. So when we talk about feminism, we're not talking about a foreign or Western agenda," he says.

The foreign agenda that does worry Pervez is the agenda of conservative evangelical Christians, who see the earthquake as a God-given opportunity to proselytize. He cites Franklin Graham and his relief operation Samaritan's Purse as an example: "He has made very harsh attacks on Islam, and then he comes here to evangelize. That endangers local Christians, and damages the good relations that religious minorities and some majority people are trying to develop through dialogue and work for communal harmony. What's the need for them here in Pakistan?

There's a viable and strong church here. Why do they need to come here?"

One Christian organization offered NGOs huge rolls of plastic sheeting to be used for shelter at a time when sheeting was a rare commodity. The group's representative was eager to show Pervez a two-inch sample of the sheeting, but Pervez was suspicious and insisted on seeing an entire roll—which turned out to be covered with crosses.

"That's in complete violation of the Code of Conduct [for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in disaster relief], and disturbs the communal harmony that local NGOs, civil society, the churches and progressive Muslims are trying to build," Pervez says. "I don't want restrictions on religions, but these are not the people who should be evangelizing. This covert, rice Christian kind of evangelization is wrong."

Ironically, both Muslim and Christian fundamentalist groups have benefited from U.S. taxpayer support. The Islamic extremists got their start with billions of dollars from the Reagan administration (matched with Saudi funding and channeled through Pakistan's security forces). The conservative Christian groups have benefited handsomely from President George W. Bush's expansion of government funding for faith-based organizations.

And both groups foster discord in Pakistan today, presenting a challenge to responsible relief and development organizations. Pervez suggests that Islamic and Christian fundamentalists are reading from the same script:

Fundamentalists are the same on both sides of the religious fence. Sometimes the Sunday sermon in church is about how cable television is bringing nudity and lipstick. And then you'll find the same sermon next Friday in the mosque. It's as if the clergy and the mullahs exchange notes. They're both against cable TV and lipstick. That's the bottom line. If you fix that then you'll fix every ill in this society.