

PAKSITAN: COLD REALITIES OF WINTER FOR EARTHQUAKE SURVIVORS.

Farooq and his family live in Mallot, one of the highest towns in the mountainous region. They lived in a tent for three months and now have a sturdier shelter, but he is impatient to build a new house. He was traveling and missed the first installment from the rebuilding fund. He says that he received the second installment but “I do not suppose I will get the rest as I cannot show that I am building the state specified model of house”. Farooq concludes somewhat despairingly, “I cannot start building as I do not have the necessary funds, and they will not give me anymore funds, because I have not started building”.

Muhammad Naeem a farmer, seems to agree. “First of all, no one came here apart from NRSP (National Rural Support Programme) for a month or two, even then we did everything ourselves, they never gave us any help whatsoever. They came here because they were ordered to.” He is angrier about the lack of water one year on, than the lack of money, telling tales of aid trucks being ‘raided’ and funds demanded by the NRSP to turn a blind eye on the non conform buildings springing up.

Qamal and his family are rebuilding their home, he is nailing down wooden struts to the side of his new building and talks about the government’s help saying, “nearly everyone I know has just got on with it themselves and are rebuilding, government help or not”. Whether or not a person would later make a claim seems to depend on his or her opinion of the merits of ‘baksheesh’. Most will tell you that, in Pakistan, you can do anything with money. This however, is true of all underdeveloped countries. A government worker, earning 3000 to 7000 Rupees per month, confronted with the offer to ‘turn a blind eye’ for 25,000 Rps, does tell its own story.

BUILD BACK BETTER.

“Ok, let’s start with hard facts, undisputed truths that shape our actions. In Pakistani controlled Kashmir, there were over 45, 000 deaths, 18, 000 of which were children. The total number (Kashmir and Pakistan) of earthquake related casualties was 128 300 injured and over 73 000 dead. In Kashmir alone we have 280 000 claims for housing, 240 000 of which are being helped financially, around 40, 000 are either non eligible, have moved to other areas of Pakistan or are unaccounted for. We do know that around 32, 000 are not housed and still in tents and precarious shelters. However, a year ago that figure was over 3.5 million”. “This is a huge task, the geographical zone affected by the earthquake is almost the size of Switzerland but we will overcome it”.

The speaker is Mr. Mansoor Qadir Dar Director of Coordination at SERRA (State Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority) in Muzaffarabad, Kashmir. “We have two options, rebuild quickly and often or rebuild once properly. Detailed planning has, of course, taken time. The quality of the building work previously was disastrous. This is earthquake country; the builders should build accordingly instead of receiving their orders to build from a corrupt decision maker, it is the bad state of the buildings that caused such a high ratio of loss amongst our children”.

Despite the delays, Mr. Dar insists that, “not one soul has been lost through cold, or hunger or even water shortage since the disaster, even in winter. Our only casualties were those due to the earthquake”. He gives credit to “the amazing work” of the NGO’s (Non Governmental Organizations) during the first 3 months following the quake. Now, as they enter the second year, the rebuilding effort is being put into motion.

The World Bank is advancing funds for part of the effort and is enforcing strict conditions, including verification that new buildings conform to strict standards. This is not a simple task, given that victims of the disaster need shelter immediately. Those who lost homes are eligible for 175,000 Rupees (about 1800 pounds sterling), paid in four installments of 25,000, 75,000, 50,000 and a final 25,000. Strict building guidelines must be followed in order to receive the funds.

Dar says that “people here will do things cheaply, take cheap options, this is why we verify the building work of private homes, (people would build cheaply if we didn’t give the money in installments. This is a very poor country and we are taking this opportunity to push ourselves years ahead of where we were before the earthquake. We have a slogan here at SERRA, Build Back Better”. It is a sensible and reachable target, but his words of caution are echoed by those closest to the situation.

Lt General Nadeem Ahmed deputy chairman of ERRA, said after a press conference in Islamabad last week, “let’s look at some statistics, “we have lost almost 500 000 houses”, (damaged or destroyed). “800 health facilities have been damaged or destroyed, 7669 schools also damaged or destroyed, so this is serious infrastructural planning and rebuilding, we have started to work on these areas and building will start on thousands of projects within the weeks and months to come. Of a total pledged amount of 6,651,362,000 USD, 1,200,000,000 USD has already been spent, (Monies are only spent as they are needed, or applied for, and cleared by ERRA. It could be argued that this is good money management as well as arguing that this proves the state is too slow). Monies handed out to those qualifying for monthly aid supplement total 3.173 billion Rps. We have decided to continue this aid for another 6 months”.

Flanked by Lt General Nadeem Ahmed, who nodded his agreement, Brigadier Waqar Raja, Chief of staff at ERRA spoke of complete control over the problems that the survivors of the quake would face in the coming weeks. “Under the ‘winterization plan’ the remaining survivors still in tents will receive new tents, the tents will be covered by outside sheeting to keep snow and cold rain to a minimum around the tent. This sheeting will also cover the areas around the tent to protect cooking areas and such like in the vicinity”.

(Certain NGO’s estimate the number of tent dwellers at around 70,000 and not 32,000).

He went on to describe how additional blankets and heating arrangements will also be provided via the UN to ensure comfortable living conditions for those in the most precarious of situations.

“We need to ensure comfort and safety to avoid the population leaving their high altitude homes and migrating down towards the larger towns, lower on the mountains. We do have contingency plans should that happen. We have chalked out a plan which includes space allocation for up to 5000 people, (when a camp gets to 3000, we will start preparing a new one to be ready for when the limit is reached.) We have everyday utility requirements for which sufficient reserves have been ensured in 3 different hubs; also we have 5 helicopters on standby for emergencies, blocked roads, casualty evacuation or other emergency situations.”

The state does seem to have a good short and long-term plan in place here giving a real chance for a maximum of the population to be better off. For those isolated in rural and difficult to access areas, winter will bring severe difficulties all the same. They refuse to leave their neighbourhoods, (earthquake red zones or not) because it has been their land for generations. They are in need of help and, although the NGO’s have done an efficient job here, they have moved on from relief to reconstruction. This means that people like Nareem, who have a real problem with their water supply, not to mention the perceived corruption of some government agencies sent here to help, may be left to their own devices.

Despite that, and as Mansoor Qadir Dar said “Nothing we do can be 100%, but we are still striving for 100%”.