

Broken Voices - They Cry for Help

By Jehanzeb Noor

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I first left home when I was selected to represent my country, Pakistan, at an international high school in the USA with students from eighty countries. I was fifteen years old. Ever since, I have studied and worked abroad in different countries and now I am a graduate student at MIT. All these years, I have tried to be a reflection of where I come from and what my country stands for. I have talked about my country often and how there is still hope for it. But these days I just stay quiet. It is because I have a broken voice.

After the recent earthquake in Pakistan, I do not even know how different it would feel to lose my own mother. It would probably be the same numbness, the same denial of pain and the same red eyes ready to spill at any moment but forced to hold back. Today, I am left feeling lucky not because my Motherland chose to bless me with abundant opportunities out of a family of limited resources. Instead I feel fortunate now just to have the basics that you and I take for granted - food and shelter, clothes and water. I could have been among the already 80,000 who will not see another day, or among the 100,000 who will cease to live very soon without proper medical attention. The country is also more helpless than ever before.

Today I read that the world has pledged about \$100 million of the \$312 million asked for the relief efforts. Much to my gratitude, the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan will visit Pakistan for a couple of days to further assess the damage and participate in reconstruction planning. His nation is expected to help out Pakistan in the most generous ways possible. Major international alliances or agencies will participate soon as well. I am thankful to the international community. And I am even more touched by the compassion of those in the MIT community who have shared this grief and burden. They have donated and prayed. When one hurts, we all do. That is what still sustains our hope in humanity.

But then every few days, I talk to my mother Naila, a schoolteacher in Pakistan. Hers is a broken voice too. More broken than mine. I find out things from her that I cannot find in the news media. Although she still goes to work every day, there is not much teaching going on. The kids in her classes, one after another, bring their toys and clothes to school instead of their textbooks, hoping these will somehow reach tens of thousands of children who have lost all they had and might also lose their lives soon.

Perhaps many days ago, these kids saw the same picture that I just looked at recently. The picture shows two little girls, no more than eight years old, standing alone, holding incense at the side of several graves, and trying to understand what death means. I wish their parents could still hear the broken voices of these girls, and find some peace through those voices. The teachers continue to collect donations, but means to send them off to the Northern Areas of Pakistan are very limited. Even more scarce is food and water, medicines and warm clothes.

International relief organizations estimate that aid has still not reached at least half a million of the three million people left without shelter due to the earthquake. Because of the lack of proper medicines for colds and tetanus, and scarcity of food and water, at least 10,000 children will die very soon. I wish that some of you had had the chance to visit this devastated area before the earth turned upside down. You would have found it beautiful and untouched. And I wish you had seen the cute little kids with green eyes and tan skin, dressed in traditional clothes. They would be playing in lush green fields as we speak.

Northern Pakistan was not modern at all, but it was self-sufficient in most ways possible, and a cultural entity of its own. Sadly, all our world knew about this region was its face of conflict, refugees and fugitives pouring in from neighboring countries. Now I hope our world also finds out that the same region is facing the worst natural catastrophe of recent times, exceeding the aftermaths of the Tsunami - the needs for which were met within 10 days of the disaster.

As I struggle to use this broken voice of a grieving son I will try to share with you, the voice that is most broken of us all. It is that of Ghulam. She had a poor but bustling family - both her son and daughter were married with several children. Then one day, in a matter of no more than few minutes, their simple life was taken away from all of them, except Ghulam, now all alone at 79 years of age. She recalls, "I used to make fun of my family for getting cold so easily in the winters. I used to tell them how tough we were in the good old days." A few days ago, Ghulam stood in a queue for winter tents. She was so physically weak that she felt her bones were going to break. Before she could make it to the front, the relief workers ran out of tents. There have not been any new tent shipments to this small village. Ghulam is bracing for a tough winter of snow and rain without any warm clothes or any shelter.

Just in the recent past when the Tsunami and Katrina struck, I made small contributions online and thought it could help. Now, when disaster of larger scale has struck again, I am prepared to do all I can, but that just is not enough.

Perhaps if the Parliamentarians, Senators and Congressmen abroad were contacted by their constituents to use their influence and send more airlift equipment, help would reach more people like Ghulam in remote corners. Perhaps if every American, and every other citizen of the world who could afford it, could contribute just \$1 each, the \$312 million funding appeal for aid could be fulfilled. Perhaps if each of us talked to or contacted our friends and family and asked them to contribute and spread the word, we would build a network of hope and bridge a huge gap between needs and resources.

In the words of Ghulam, "I used to be tougher than most but this winter is different. I actually do not know if I would be able to make it all the way to the end. And I cannot really stand in a tent queue again. May be some one will bring me a tent."

Hers is another Broken Voice, most broken of us all.

These Broken Voices are crying for your help. Although their hopes grow dimmer with every passing hour, they have faith the world will care. I do not know what exactly to ask of you, or how much to ask. Just one word comes to mind - help.

And when you reflect or pray, please think of these Broken Voices. Soon, the winter will arrive. These Broken Voices have nothing to find hope in this hopelessness. They might not have tomorrow, all they have is now. And these Broken Voices have no one else to ask for help; all they have is you.

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