

The News International
July 8, 2007

Welcoming aid

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

I'm hungry. I haven't eaten all day, but I can't complain about food, not now. I've just returned from Kubu Sayed Khan, a village in the interior of Sindh past Shadadkot. The village has been ravaged by the cyclone and monsoon rains and the depth and breadth of suffering there is unlike anything I've ever seen before. My growling stomach has been shamed into silence and I mentally rebuke myself for allowing my brain to process such selfish needs. Shadadkot, which we pass to reach Kubu Sayed Khan, has been doubly battered. First there were the heavy rains and then the F.P Bund dam burst in three separate parts flooding the city. Not only are we completely unprepared for the preparable, but we're unable to ward against technical mishaps too. The dam, built by the British, is only now -- some ten days after the rains hit -- being repaired. I don't mean to be a killjoy, but that's too little too late. The road on the Peshawar-Gwadar motorway leading into Shadadkot is lined on both sides by homeless families. Some of them have tents, the fortunate ones, while the other not so fortunate ones have two or three charpais pushed up against each other in a tent like formation, threatening collapse at any given moment. The charpais have swathes of fabric or ajraks over them to protect against the excruciating sun -- it's four in the afternoon here and fifty degrees Celsius. It's a macabre runway, reminding every car that drives past what has happened here since the rain fell. The village graveyard of Kubu Sayed Khan has been submerged under water, the only sign that it is in fact a graveyard are the green gravestones peeping out from the water, otherwise there's nothing. There is water as far as the eye can see. The summer crops, rice mainly, have been ruined, tiny huts have been decimated, cattle and livestock have wasted away and then there are the people. Kubu Sayed Khan isn't on a main road and its residents have no access to medical care or relief goods. They are isolated, untreated, and unwell. Soni, a mother of five, told me that her youngest daughter Sana has diarrhoea. Sana had been screaming out of thirst and they had no choice but to give her rainwater to drink -- there is nothing but rainwater to drink in Kubu Sayed Khan. Sana has no clothes on either, only a blue flowered shirt -- again, she's one of the lucky ones. Zainab's son, a one-year-old called Jehangir Khan, is completely naked. His little body is covered with red dots, a rash from the sun. His palms are peeling and his hands look as if they've shed the first layer of skin on them.

The children, not yet weathered by years under the hot interior sun, look devastating. Their faces and bodies are coated in sweat; it looks like glycerine on them. Sticky beads of perspiration hang on their faces and the nape of their necks. They don't talk to us while we're there. They're too thirsty to talk to us while we're there. Zainab says she's seen helicopters flying overhead, but they never stopped at Kubu Sayed Khan. 'Where did they go?' I asked her. 'For VIP visits nearby' she responded simply, 'they didn't bring us anything'. There was a time, long ago in the 1970s, when Pakistanis caught in a snowstorm in Chitral received relief goods and were airlifted to medical centres by state helicopters. That doesn't happen anymore. As Zainab put it, now helicopters only service VIPs.

Take a look at our most recent budget, formulated in billions and billions of rupees. The army, as per usual, received the lion's share. A defence budget of 275 billion rupees was announced for 2007-08. This is a healthy increase from 223 billion rupees in 2006-07. Mashallah, as we say. I won't bore you with the numbers for education (less than two per cent of our GDP -- Pakistan spends less on education than most countries in the world) but factor this in: the money given to social protection, environmental protection, housing and community affairs, and health services and affairs combined doesn't even amount to a fraction of our defence budget. It's not even half of it. In essence, it's nothing.

So naturally as the news of millions of Pakistanis being displaced by the rain started to come out, the Pakistani government did what they do best in times of natural disasters. They asked other countries to take care of it. The BBC announced that the Pakistani government was 'welcoming aid' for its cyclone victims. How polite, at least it's not begging. Of course they'd 'welcome' aid -- they can't very well divert a miniscule amount from the billions of rupees set aside for weapons, helicopters, tanks, fighter planes and other toys for the welfare of their people. I know what the counter argument is, it was the same during the 2005 earthquake (military budget for 2004-05: 194 billion rupees) -- we're trying/we're doing our best/we need time to react/we've done a relatively decent job. I said it then and I'll say it again now. I am not going to defend what is, but what ought to be. I don't care how decent a job they've done now, it's just not good enough. It could be a lot better. The people of Kubu Sayed Khan could have been treated in a humane and timely manner. They could have been treated full stop. I think the Pakistani people would 'welcome' a more responsible and sensitive government -- and by that don't presume for a second that I am referring to Benawazir, as I like to call them. They were no better. This isn't just a rag job on the army; civilian governments can be useless too.

As we left Kubu Sayed Khan, I couldn't help think that it was over for them. They're only a few hundred people, easily forgotten and easily glided over in newspapers. So I did what any other person my age would do: I texted. I texted anyone I'd ever spoken to for more than five minutes and asked them to collect water, canned food, and medicine. Friends or strangers it didn't matter, they came through. In an hour we'd managed to round up supplies to be sent to Kubu Sayed Khan. Collective action is a problem with us Pakistanis, don't let be. Don't wait for someone else -- i.e. the state -- to take care of something. State apparatuses are slow and cumbersome. Do it yourself. Get on the phone and harass people you know. Collect what you can and donate it to Edhi or the Red Crescent. This is the time to get radical, let's 'welcome' it.