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Why were we completely unprepared for the preparable?

By Fatima Bhutto

For a region that lies in the crosshairs of the Eurasian and Indian tectonic plates, why were we taken completely by surprise by the October 8, 2005 earthquake?

I have been told time and time again that now is not the time for cynicism and distrust, that now is the time to come together and defend what is, not what ought to be.

But a year later, so that we may stand in solidarity with the survivors of the October 8th earthquake, let us ask the questions that those deprived of a voice cannot ask.

With almost 80,000 dead, 11,000 children orphaned, 6,000 schools destroyed, 80% of all health facilities no longer operational and up to three million people displaced it is most certainly the time to ask questions and to demand answers.

I'll give you 12 questions, you give me 12 answers.

Why are the citizens of Balakot being told that they must move 30 km to the South and rebuild their city in Bakriyal? They have been told that their homeland is a "red zone", unsuitable for human habitation, and that they must pack their bags and leave. The survivors of Balakot lost their city once, and now for a second time. They have been made refugees within their own country. The Earthquake Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Authority (ERRA) insists that this is the only way forward and pacifies those who are reluctant to leave their birthplaces for an imaginary one by insisting that the new Balakot-Bakriyal hybrid will be "a modern city and also a tourist resort".

Last October 400,000 homes were destroyed, razed to the ground. By this October, only 17% of those homes have been rebuilt. Rome wasn't (re) built in a day, this is true, but how many winters will pass before adequate housing has been provided to the homeless of Muzaffarabad and Bagh?

Where did those six billion dollars go? What has the omnipresent President's Relief Fund done in these last 12 months? Why haven't the government and ERRA provided us, the people, with a detailed report on where the funds donated for earthquake relief are going? I don't mean a press statement that deals in a sum here or a sum there, I mean a transparent up- to- date official report.

ERRA said this past week that "some funds had been misappropriated" but quickly jumped on to say that drastic action had been taken and all of the fiendish perpetrators had been caught and taken to task. How much was misappropriated? How much is still being misappropriated?

On October 5, three days ago, President Musharraf asked foreign donors to donate more funds to the \$6.7 billion dollars already pledged. Coincidentally, this is just days after his meeting with President

Bush where they negotiated Pakistan's purchase of a fleet of F-16 fighter jets. Quick fact – the unit cost of an A/B model F-16 is \$14.6 million dollars, the jazzier C/D model costs \$18.8 million dollars per unit. This answers what would have been my tenth question - Why is Pakistan almost totally dependent on foreign expertise, foreign aid, and foreigners to save and protect her people?

When I visited the affected areas in November of last year I met and spoke to many survivors, mostly children. On one of my trips to an Earthquake Relief Hospital in Banigala, Islamabad I met a young girl named Faiza. Faiza had her arm amputated after the school she was in collapsed and she was covered in the debris of the broken building. She was a slight girl, a fifth grader, and she wore her dupatta in a way that it covered her arms so that her amputation was not visible. Before leaving the hospital, one of Faiza's doctors asked me if I could help in procuring a prosthetic arm for her. I couldn't help, I didn't know how. Faiza, who wrote a piece on her experiences for the book I published on the earthquake 8:50 a.m, ended her account by asking "the government of Pakistan to help me get a prosthetic arm". They didn't help either, maybe they didn't know how. Faiza finally got her prosthesis sometime this spring, it came from Germany .

On this one year anniversary let us raise our voices and demand answers. Let this be the stand we take. While speaking to a group of students in Karachi this past week on the issue of the earthquake, they asked perhaps the most important question: what can we do to help? Go back up North, be part of something larger, something better. Get involved with organizations that are still collecting goods and rebuilding schools and homes. Raise your voices. The students I spoke to suggested starting a "Where's the Money?" campaign. Do it, I told them, I'll sign up the minute you do. Write. Write letters, write articles, write to ERRA and ask them these questions. You cannot reach ERRA directly, but can contact to them through a form on their website at <http://www.erra.gov.pk/WebForms/ContactUs.aspx>

The devastation wrecked by earthquake, comparable in magnitude to the 1906 San Francisco, 1935 Quetta, and 2001 Gujarat quakes, is going to take years to overcome. Will our collective compassion fatigue withstand the passage of years? Let me answer that one myself, I hope so. The spirit that brought Pakistanis together in the initial weeks after the earthquake was extraordinary in its scope and strength. People from all over the country gave themselves financially, physically, and emotionally to the relief effort – whether it entailed packing foodstuffs and medicine to be sent to the injured, raising funds for the survivors, or traveling to the affected areas to participate in the reconstruction effort. The awesomeness of your, the peoples, empathy and compassion was and still remains unparalleled. Don't lose sight of that, millions are counting on us.