

CHAPTER 3 »

Sleeping with the Dead

Pakistan February 2006



Refugee camp near Mansebra, Pakistan

A Hollywood reception really is as far from northern Afghanistan as one can get. But that's exactly where I found myself during November of 2005 when Dr. Salman Naqvi and I struck up a conversation about humanitarian aid. Salman had just returned from Pakistan where he worked alongside the Relief International team to provide emergency care following the devastating earthquake just a month earlier. Like most Americans, I was well aware of the ravages of the tsunami that had devastated people, homes, and livelihoods throughout the Indian Ocean area just ten months earlier. Like most Americans, I'd watched endless hours of coverage of the tragic hurricane that wiped out much of the American Gulf Coast in late August. Both the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina were huge natural disasters that left millions of people either dead or displaced. And, like most Americans, I knew little to nothing about the earthquake that devastated northern Pakistan.

The easy question is why? Why did the media respond so overwhelmingly to the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina but not to the earthquake in Pakistan? Why were there outpourings of support, even benefit concerts, for both events and nothing for Pakistan? In the case of the tsunami, events happened in and around tourist areas familiar to many Americans. It was a catastrophic event to be sure, and it happened during Western holidays when political news often takes a hiatus. It certainly deserved the coverage and the outpouring of support.

Hurricane Katrina occurred in front of our own eyes—live and in color, 24/7. We knew it was coming, we knew it would be deadly, and we knew, fairly quickly, that too little was being done

by our government to avoid disaster. It was both a nightmare to many and a tragedy of errors on our own doorstep. It certainly deserved the coverage and the outpouring of support.

By contrast, events of the early morning of Saturday, October 8, 2005, in northern Pakistan had a tough time making page one, and an even harder time staying there. Perhaps it was because Americans, along with much of the rest of the world, were worn out. Perhaps it was because Pakistan, though an ally by some standards, is an Islamic nation caught up in many Americans' fatigue over and fear about all things Muslim. I don't know the answer, but I do know that Dr. Salman Naqvi, a successful doctor living in southern California, heard the call and made it to his ancestral home just days after the devastating quake. His story was an inspiration and within minutes of meeting each other, we shook hands, confirming our shared commitment to document the aftermath of the earthquake and facilitate fundraising for the ongoing efforts of Relief International.

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NO ONE KNOWS exactly how many Pakistanis died on or shortly after October 8 in 2005, but the numbers are grim. It was a sunny, beautiful autumn morning in and around Pakistan's densely populated Northwest Frontier Province and Azad Kashmir. Most children were in school. Because it was during the Muslim holy month of *Ramadan*, many women and men were still in their homes. The earthquake hit at 8:50 A.M. Registering 7.6 on the Richter Scale (roughly equal to the 1906 San Francisco earthquake), the earthquake was felt as far away as the Afghan capital



Earthquake epicenter—city of Muzaffarabad



Refugee camp near epicenter



Children in camp near Mansebra

of Kabul. Muzaffarabad, a bustling tourist city in the Himalayan mountains northeast of Islamabad, was the epicenter. In just 85 seconds, schools, homes and businesses collapsed. Approximately 75,000 people lost their lives, among them, an all too-high percentage of women and children. As many as three million people lost their homes and millions more were directly impacted.

AMONG THE MANY international NGOs providing support after the quake, Los Angeles-based Relief International was doing outstanding work in Pakistan. With the help of CEO Farshad Rastegar and Dr. Salman Naqvi, we put together a trip slated for early February 2006. Our mission would once again include actor Ben Kingsley and Mike Speaks. Both volunteered to help document the damage and relief effort and to work on fundraising for Relief International. Ben's notoriety for his movie portrayal of Mahatma Gandhi in the 1982 Richard Attenborough film *Gandhi* would be a plus in Pakistan. In addition, Mike had spent several years living in the area around Muzaffarabad as an international wilderness guide. He knew the area well and had his own business contacts throughout the region. That said, no trip to Pakistan is easy for Westerners and logistics, especially in regions challenged by war or disaster, are often uniquely complicated.

For example, who knew the streets of Islamabad would erupt in fury over a Danish cartoonist's depiction of the prophet Mohammed just days before our schedule departure? Despite weeks of preparation, our visit was postponed for security reasons. Two weeks later, once things had settled a bit, we were off. Pakistan is not considered a war zone but tensions do run high,

especially in the western regions bordering Afghanistan and in Azad Kashmir, which borders India. Conflict is a part of life.

Our landing in Islamabad was marked by new protests as well as new terrorist threats to Western hotels, including the Marriott Hotel where we were camped out during our brief stay in Islamabad. Security was high in and around the hotel and, as had been the case during my stay in Addis Ababa years earlier, security staff checked each vehicle thoroughly before we were allowed to enter the driveway. Before entering the hotel, we were also asked to pass through metal detectors and our equipment was routinely searched. Islamabad, which as the capital of Pakistan is filled with government buildings, has instituted the highest levels of security in the country. Still, random acts of terror are sadly commonplace in Pakistan. Four people were killed during an explosion outside the Marriott Hotel in the city of Karachi just one week after our departure. More than 50 people were killed and 250 injured when terrorists blew up the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad during September 2008. Yes, the same hotel that had accommodated our delegation during 2006 is now completely gone.

AS HAD BEEN the case in Afghanistan, day one for our delegation was spent mostly in briefings about security and protocol. In this case, however, our escorts would be both the Relief International team and quartet of Pakistani soldiers deployed by Major-General Farooq Ahmad Khan. Major-General Farooq was a bit of a national hero thanks to his skilled and highly organized supervision of relief efforts following the earthquake. With considerably less money and far fewer resources than those provided





Camp near Mansehra



Hospital in Muzaffarabad



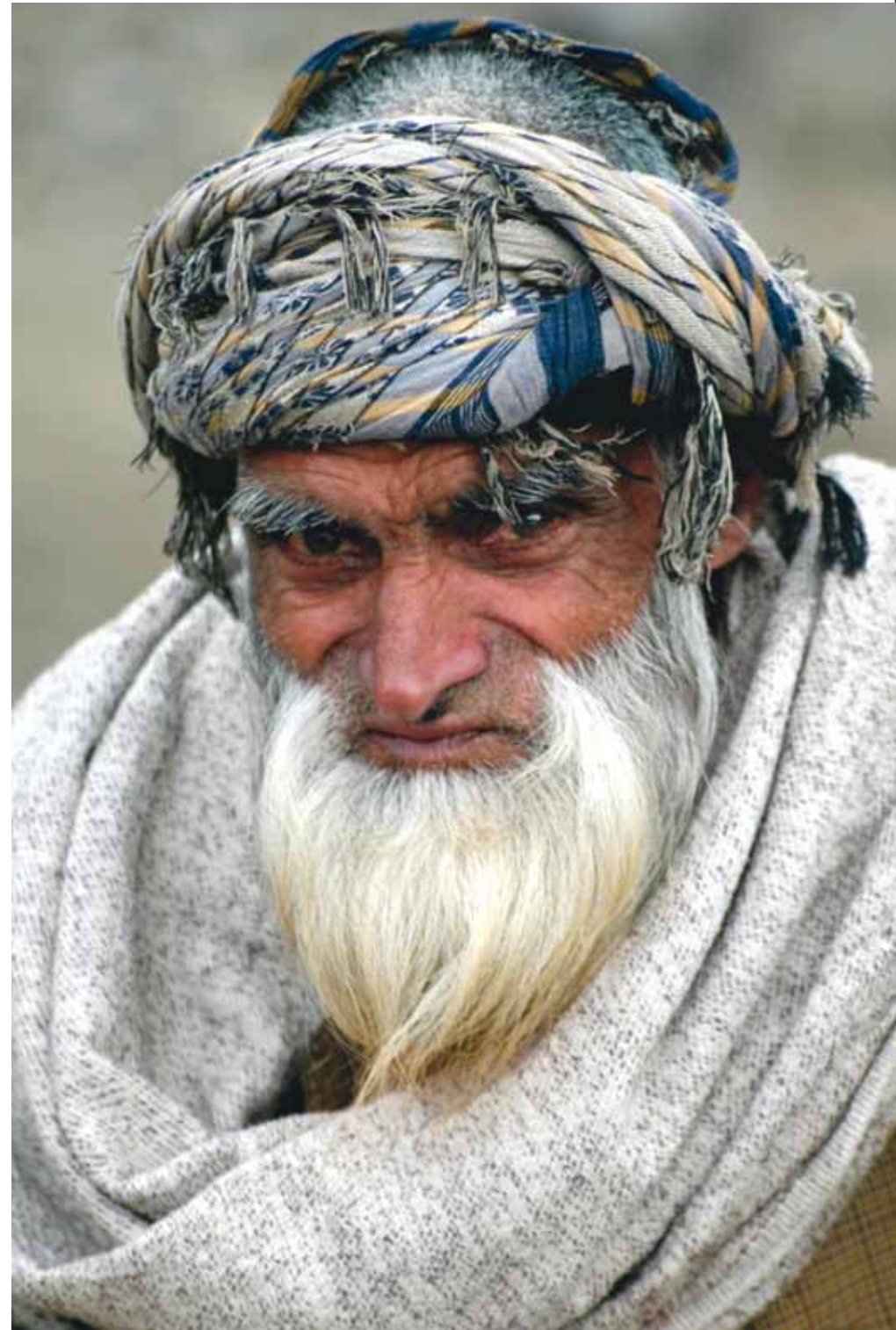
during the Asian tsunami or Hurricane Katrina, Major-General Farooq and his colleagues managed operations for scores of international NGOs and thousands of volunteers from around the world as they convened under one common goal: saving lives by providing medical care, food, water, and temporary shelter. Thousands were saved by their quick action and organization.

We also had brief, separate meetings of a more diplomatic nature with then Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz and then President Pervez Musharraf. The meetings were part briefing, part protocol, part friendly effort to allow everyone to rub elbows with everyone else. The meeting with Aziz, whose practical job description was more international business and foreign affairs, took place in Islamabad. The meeting with Musharraf, who maintained his status as both president and general at the same time, was in the adjacent city of Rawalpindi. Although it may seem counterintuitive, the offices housing Aziz were quite modern and stylish (read ‘more conducive to meetings with the international crowd’), while the residence and offices of Musharraf were older and more mundane (read ‘relate to the common man’).

Neither meeting will go down in the annals of diplomacy but it was interesting to witness this awkward teatime with little to do but present gifts and take photographs. In the case of Aziz, he spoke like a man who’d worked internationally for most of his life. Even his accent was almost indiscernible. He was well versed in all things American and European. Most importantly, our half-hour with Prime Minister Aziz gave us a chance to talk up the work being done by Relief International and to reinforce the value of Pakistani government assistance in working with international NGOs.

It was also interesting to spend a few minutes in the presence of President Musharraf. A powerful general in the Pakistani military, Musharraf obtained power in a bloodless military coup in 1999 when he tossed out the elected Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif. Within two years, he had become America's supposed ally in the so-called "war on terror" until his resignation in 2008. During our meeting, Musharraf was affable but stiff. His body language and upright posture suggested either a man of extraordinary protocol or someone who was managing back pain. Given his age and military background, I'd bet on protocol. He was also surprisingly calm for a political figure roundly despised by so many of his country's citizens and in a nation so overwhelmed by turmoil. I remember wondering what would take priority in his days' work. The battle against terrorists and the hunt for Osama bin Laden in the mountains to the west? Maintaining the security of nuclear facilities? Political battles over the failed judiciary system? The opening of the Freedom Bridge connecting the two halves of Kashmir in the effort to build diplomatic relations with India? Rebuilding schools, homes and hospitals in the earthquake devastated regions? Suffice it to say, a half hour with our delegation must have been like a walk in the park for the president.

Speaking of the '99 coup, Pakistan is not exactly known for stable government and Musharraf's rule was anything but stable. He was forced out of office in 2008 after a prolonged fight with the Judiciary and an outcry from his citizens, especially lawyers. Overcoming instability in Pakistan is tough, in part because Pakistan is a relatively new country making what appears to be a genuine but often failed attempt at democracy. Thanks to the British colonists who'd ruled over what is now Pakistan until





Damaged cemetery near Muzaffarabad



Makeshift grave in city center—Muzaffarabad

shortly after World War II, the lines that make up modern Pakistan are both awkward and arbitrary. The short version of the story is that Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah (along with millions of lesser known freedom fighters) were among the leaders of the movement for independence from the British in the 1930s and 1940s. But the goal of dividing the Indian sub-continent into separate nations presented enormous challenges based on ethnicity, culture, language and religion. It wasn't easy for people then and it's not easy now.

Still, in mid-August 1947, they achieved a version of their wish along with all the complications, whether intended or not. The Indian sub-continent, under British domination for approximately 200 years, was divided into Pakistan and India. What was then called East Pakistan achieved full independence in 1971 (with the aid of India) and is now called Bangladesh. When I say complications, I'm referring, mainly, to the decision to divide several key provinces including Bengal, Punjab and Kashmir under the authority of Pakistan or India instead of one or the other. The result is that none of the three nations have ever been completely satisfied with their boundaries or the division of the provinces. Ethnic and religious tensions remain along with disputes over natural resources. More than a few wars have been fought since partition, including years of ongoing battles in the Himalayan mountains of Kashmir, often across glaciers at more than 15,000 feet in elevation!

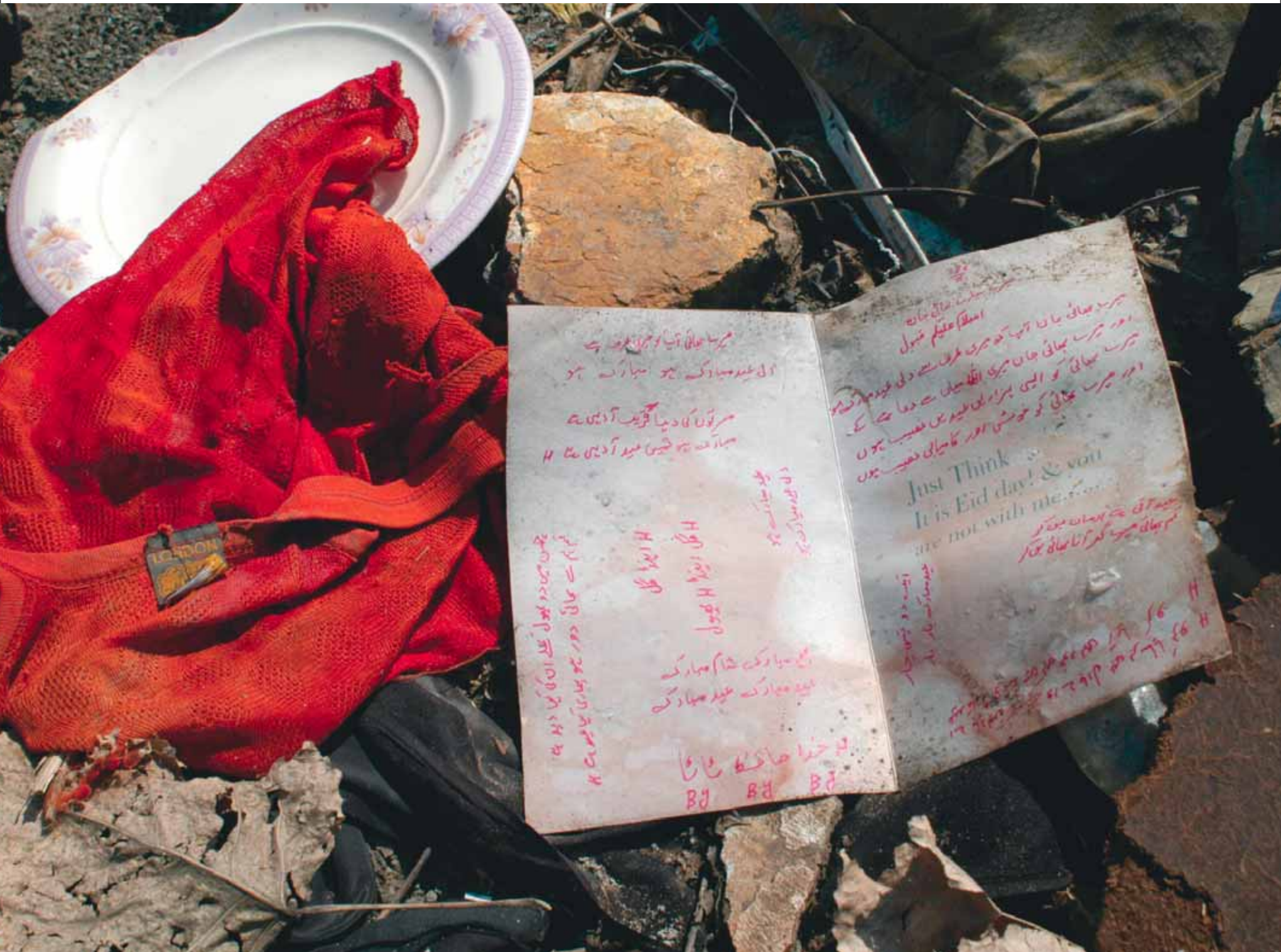
Additionally, between 500,000 to 1 million people died during the partition alone. By some estimates 2 to 3 million more are "unaccounted for." The American Civil War, the deadliest conflict in American history, resulted not in separation but in

unity. By contrast, the division of the Indian subcontinent resulted in separation and independence, at a staggering cost to human lives and property. It involved the largest migration of people in human history. An estimated fifteen million people moved from their homes to be part of whichever nation they perceived would best protect their religious beliefs. Some went willingly, but many went because they were terrified of what would happen if they didn't relocate. More than seven million Muslims moved from what is now India to Pakistan. More than seven million Hindus and Sikhs moved from Pakistan to what is now India. During the migration, millions of people lost their lives, their livelihoods, their land, their possessions, and more. Families then and today remain divided by border crossings. And tensions among the three nations remain high.

Pakistan, which was created as a Muslim state and has a Muslim constitution, became a republic in 1956. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Benazir's dad) ruled as a civilian from 1971-77 when he was disposed by the military under General Zia ul-Haq. But he wasn't just deposed, he was also hanged after the Pakistani Supreme Court ruled four to three in favor of execution (he had been charged and convicted of killing the father of a dissident politician in 1974). To the chagrin of many, General Zia imposed *Sharia*, an Islamic legal code. General Zia died during a midair explosion on a military aircraft in 1988. Voters in Pakistan then elected their first female Prime Minister to lead the country, Benazir Bhutto. Bhutto was also the first elected leader of a Muslim state. The Oxford-educated Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif bandied power back and forth through the 1990s before Musharraf took power in the '99 coup.



Temporary school room in Azad Kashmir



Eid Day memories among the rubble

Recent history doesn't bode much better for real democracy in Pakistan. Benazir Bhutto, who was challenging Musharraf and others for the presidency, was killed in an assassination attempt while running for office on December 27th, 2007. The exact cause of her death remains in dispute. Her husband, the controversial Asif Ali Zardari, was elected in her place during 2008.

UNLIKE THE CHALLENGES facing Afghanistan or Darfur, two man-made crises fraught with policy and human rights issues related to war and genocide, international politics played little to no role in our mission to Pakistan. After two nights at the Marriott, we were off by car to the city of Mansehra on the outskirts of the most heavily damaged quake areas. We stayed at a Relief International guesthouse in Mansehra that had survived the earthquake. It was our home for all except one night of our journey into the devastated areas.

During the next week we visited refugee camps in and around Mansehra; most housed many thousands of displaced people. We witnessed the complete devastation of Balakot, a city the government has since decided is too far gone to be rebuilt. And we spent a full day and night in the nearly uninhabitable city of Muzaffarabad. A once-thriving community of roughly 90,000 people and the administrative capital of Azad Kashmir, Muzaffarabad was laid to ruin. Entire mountainsides had crumbled, houses were torn off hillsides and both the Jhelum and Neelum Rivers were diverted in places due to massive rock and mudslides.

Complicating matters was the typical rain, snow and cold of a Himalayan winter at high elevation. Most people were living in tent camps supplied by the government, the U.N., and various

NGOs, some in communities above 10,000 feet. By the time we arrived, the tent camps were operating much like cities with temporary schools, temporary mosques, temporary clinics, and a smattering of start-up commerce with a black market in everything from food and clothing to auto parts and wheelbarrows.

As a former television news photographer, I'd witnessed devastation before, but nothing on the scale of the Pakistan earthquake. Roads were impassable. Bridges were gone. Hospitals had crumbled. Schools were reduced to piles of mud, brick, splintered wood, and metal. Homes were split in half, framed by jagged cracks several meters wide or crushed beneath the weight of an unsupported roof.

A few miles from Muzaffarabad, I spent more than an hour walking in and at times climbing over the rubble of a village near the epicenter of the quake. I'd been told that shortly after the quake, widowers would spend long hours combing through the rubble, searching for remnants of lives lost so abruptly. They would search for hours, alone, wandering. On this day, months after the quake, I could see two men walking alone, separated by hundreds of yards, lost in their thoughts. What were they thinking? I wondered. How did they cope with the sudden loss of a wife, a child, a father, a mother? What meaning were they searching for? What hope could they find living in a tent, their possessions gone, livelihood lost, their family a memory? What comfort did they find in returning, day after day, to the rubble of their former homes?

I sat on a painted green slab of cement. The cold began to sink in as rain washed away whatever energy was left from generations of memories. There were no recognizable structures, just



Mother and children in camp near Mansebra

piles of rubble sprinkled with personal possessions—a broken plate, a random shoe, a wedding photo, a bent headset, a crushed child’s toy, a holiday card celebrating Eid Day. Life had stopped abruptly in the middle of a beautiful Saturday morning four months earlier.

WHILE STAYING OVERNIGHT in Muzaffarabad, we booked rooms at the only hotel still standing. I use that term “still standing” loosely because while the hotel had a couple of rooms for rent, they did not have hot water and the electricity came from a gas-powered generator. I’ve stayed in too many bad hotels, but this wasn’t bad, just unusual. When Mike and I walked to the door of our room we couldn’t help but look to the right and left down the long hallways. On each end, the walls were missing completely. It was a cool winter night and a slight breeze was blowing the thin plastic sheeting taped and stapled to the abrupt ending of the hallway. The sides of the hotel had crumbled and been swept into the river. The balcony overlooking the river, a feature that had drawn tourists to the hotel for a generation, was also gone. Our room had a small space heater, a broken shower, and walls that wore the deep cracks of the earthquake. With the cracks in the ceiling and the dribble of rain finding its way inside and along the walls, we unplugged the space heater, opting instead for the one safe decision we could make.

As we toured by road and in a helicopter provided by the Aga Khan Foundation, it quickly became clear that virtually all of Azad Kashmir and the Northwest Frontier Province hadn’t fared much better than Muzaffarabad. Every time a seemingly intact building would catch our eye from a distance, we’d find, on closer

inspection, that it was cracked and sagging beyond repair. In some places, makeshift graves had been constructed, in others existing cemeteries had been unearthed or ravaged by deep crevices carved through the broken earth. Paved roads were potholed and cracked; gravel roads were sloping off hillsides, most impassable. Most schools were gone, and most hospitals had been too damaged in the quake to provide any kind of emergency support. Hundreds of doctors, nurses and teachers had been killed. During a stop in Balakot to survey damage, we interviewed two teenage sisters, Sadia and Rabia. They'd been in their three-story school when the quake hit. Feeling the first tremor, Rabia's teacher had yelled at the students to run for their lives. The teacher, along with 325 of the 450 students, died instantly under crumbling slabs of concrete.

We visited hundreds of recently turned graves watched over by widows and widowers with lost expressions. What does someone do today, this day and the next, when their home and family are suddenly gone? We watched very young kids playing in the rubble of Balakot and the refugee camps in Mansehra, their world too new for the devastation of the earthquake to seem like anything more than an adventure. And we met other children, usually somewhat older, sitting alone, still in shock. Their limbs had healed, their head wounds were gone, but their hearts and souls were scarred forever.

At a distant camp in Azad Kashmir, our entourage toured a school where the buildings had fallen, the walls and ceilings in rubble. Relief workers had helped get things back to normal with makeshift classrooms under blue tents provided by UNICEF. Several of the students greeted us with a song and the principal



Displaced by the earthquake—near Muzaffarabad



Sadia and Rabia in the rubble of their schoolhouse—Balakot



Earthquake damage



Child displaced near Balakot

did all he could to provide tea and hospitality on the lawn near the debris of the fallen school building. As I filmed the students and teachers in several tents, everything seemed normal in so many ways. Good kids, hard at work learning math, English, writing skills and studying the *Qur'an*. But I noticed one young girl who sat outside the tent on a rock pile. She was alone, wearing a stocking cap and a dirty sweatshirt with her Mickey Mouse book bag. She was watching the classroom as if she wanted to be a part of it but wasn't sure how to fit in. Perhaps uncertain what to make of my intentions, she watched me photograph the classroom with intensity but without a definable expression.

Then, for the first time in a week, our group separated as if circumstance dictated we follow the beat of the village. Ben and Mike moved from tent to tent with Major-General Farooq, inspecting the progress of a community working to overcome the challenge of a fallen schoolhouse. At the same time, I decided to sit down next to the girl. That was it; we just sat. And sat. Dr. Naqvi and his colleague Laila Karamali stood near a new cemetery a hundred yards away, giving comfort to a widow who shared her grief. After about twenty minutes, I stood up to leave. Before going, I motioned to her with my camera, my little pantomime request to take someone's picture when we can't speak the same language. She didn't respond either way—no affect, no expression. I sat back down about two feet away. When I raised my camera, she offered a flat but forward look straight into my lens. If it's possible for two people to speak clearly to each other without talking, we did. I took her photo. For reasons I can't quite articulate, I couldn't find a way to include it here. It's as if she was



Makeshift shelter—Northwest Frontier Province

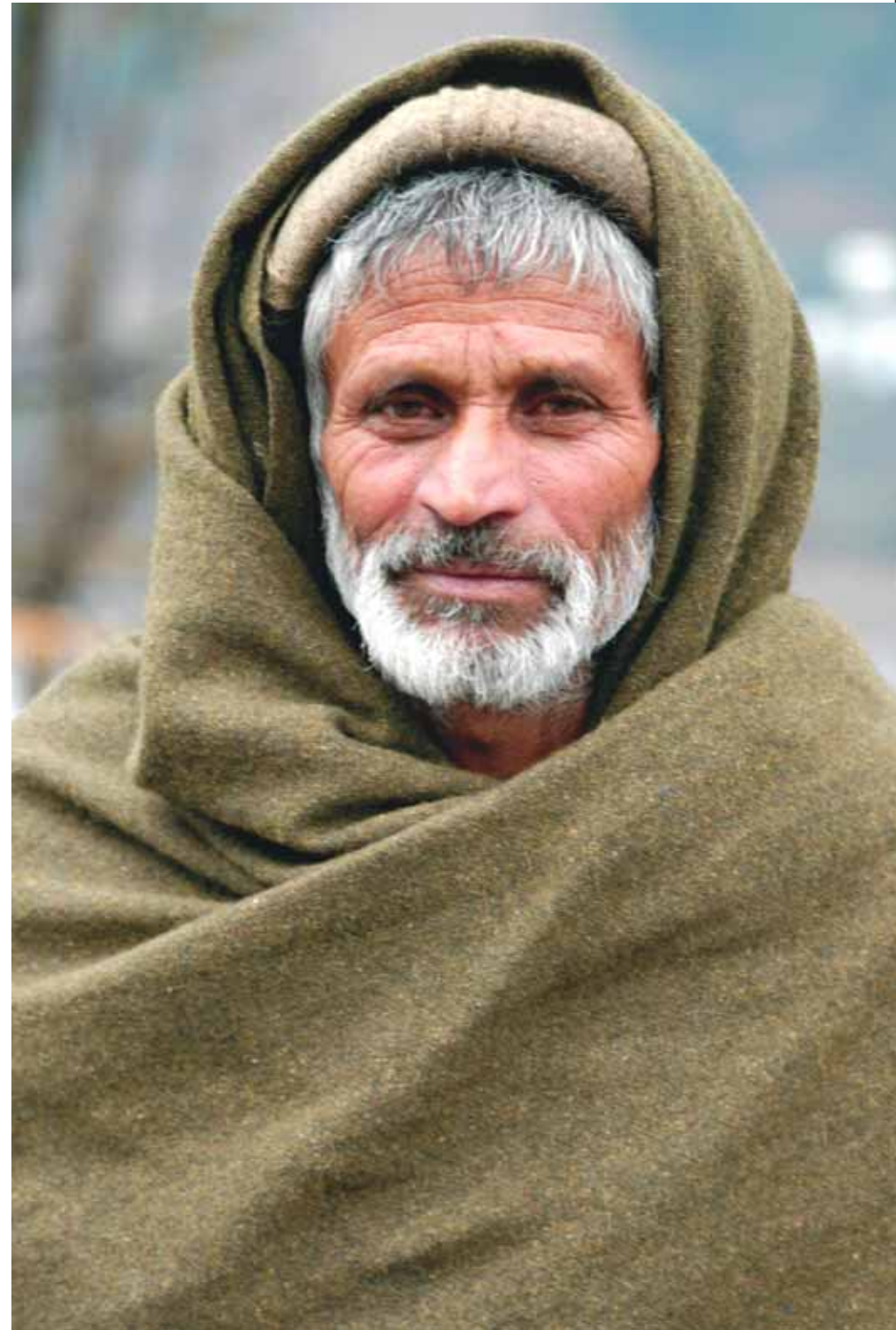


Food distribution in Balakot

letting me make the picture to motivate my own hope, rather than capture her lack of it. I have it framed and hanging near my office desk. She looks at me every day, a reminder of who's out there and how it's going. Sometimes better, sometimes worse.

DURING OUR VISIT to various camps, I was impressed by the vast number of NGOs operating in the field even without significant resources. Many were familiar, such as Oxfam, Save the Children, Relief International, and Doctors Without Borders, among others. But what was equally impressive was that both Saudi Arabia and Cuba had sent in fully equipped medical teams and had set up tent clinics. In the case of Cuba, they were still operating a full clinic months after the earthquake and, wisely, they were well staffed with female doctors. Given the traditions of Islam, many injured women refused to be treated by male doctors at the time of the quake. Among the nations that responded, Cuba had no previous diplomatic relations with Pakistan. They have since opened an embassy in Islamabad.

IN THE REFUGEE camps during our few days in Pakistan, I photographed Dr. Naqvi at work alongside the team from Relief International. We were a very long way from that reception in Hollywood. Laila was a trained social worker and she attended to many who expressed their grief in a quiet, disarming way. Both Laila and Dr. Naqvi have family in Pakistan and both felt a strong sense of responsibility to be there. It was, for each, their second time visiting the quake zone in less than four months. From a practical standpoint, relief efforts had shifted from emergency care to long term care and the needs were different. Even in the



Friendly face among those displaced by the earthquake



middle of winter, efforts were already underway to create the resources people would need to rebuild and relocate back to their villages. That took the form of developing micro-loan programs, replacing livestock, rebuilding schools and hospitals, and constructing temporary, earthquake-resistant shelter.

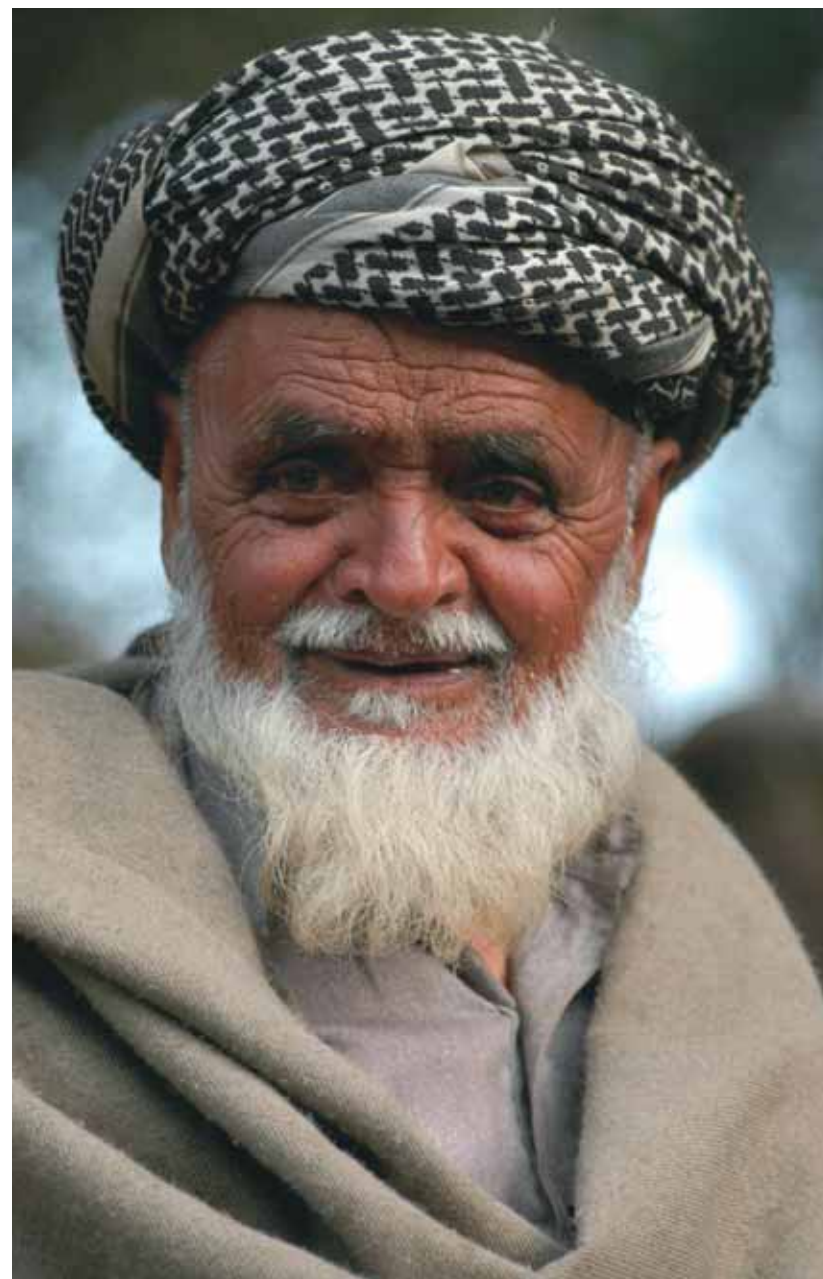
Like many NGOs that responded to the call, Relief International had been in the field every day since October 8. The disaster created a need far greater than any single aid group could handle and, unlike the huge financial outpouring of support for victims of the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, the resources were limited. Comparisons to other disasters and the global response may be inadequate in telling the story here. Suffice it to say that much of the world missed this one.



THE PHOTOGRAPHS SHOW the destruction and devastation following the earthquake, nearly four months after that horrific day. Since that time, much has been accomplished in helping the victims of the earthquake return to some level of normalcy. Prior to the quake, the people of this region, though often poor, were well educated and had a bright future. The infrastructure, especially roads and schools, were fairly good before the quake and much has been restored. It was also an area well known for its dislike of America and American foreign policy related to Afghanistan and much of the Middle East. Emotional, political, economic, religious, and philosophical ties to members of the Taliban and al-Qaeda are considered significant in this region.



Survivor in the Winter rain



Survivors

It's worth noting that shortly after the earthquake, American helicopters, many deployed from Afghanistan, flew into the Northwest Frontier Province bringing food and medical supplies. In all likelihood, their route took them directly over villages in the mountainous areas that U.S. forces claim are harboring al-Qaeda. Still, they were, for the most part, welcomed with open arms by the victims of the earthquake. Though some might argue that the U.S. response was not enough, the aid was warmly received as was the equally important symbolic gesture of compassion. In that moment, the people of northwest Pakistan were not the "evil doers" and America was not the "evil empire." Providing aid was the right thing to do, and while it may not have been the intention, the diplomatic impact was significant.

During our visit, we too were greeted warmly by everyone we met. What happened in Pakistan could happen anywhere and the gesture of support, compassion and kindness goes a long way toward humanizing those with whom we may appear to have little in common. I will never forget my colleagues in Pakistan—Salman Naqvi, Laila Karamali, Gulnaz Zohrabbekova, Ben Kingsley, and Mike Speaks—in all the moments when they held the hand of an orphaned child, embraced a widowed farmer, or nursed the physical or emotional wounds of women who'd lost their family and their livelihood. All our differences simply melted away.