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In Islamabad, the challenge to risk for peace

Kathy Kelly | Jun. 4, 2009

Photo by Kathy Kelly

Islamabad, Pakistan

Shortly after arriving in Pakistan, one week ago, we met a weaver and his extended family, numbering 76 in all, who had been forcibly displaced from their homes in Fathepur, a small village in the Swat Valley.

Fighting between the Pakistani military and the Taliban had intensified. Terrified by aerial bombing and anxious to leave before a curfew would make flight impossible, the family packed all the belongings they could carry and fled on foot. It was a harrowing four day journey over snow-covered hills.

Leaving their village, they faced a Taliban check point where a villager trying to leave had been assassinated that same morning. Fortunately, a Taliban guard let them pass. Walking many miles each day, with 45 children and 22 women, they supported one another as best they could. Men took turns carrying a frail grandmother on their shoulders. One woman gave birth to her baby, Hamza, on the road. When they arrived, exhausted, at a rest stop in the outskirts of Islamabad, they had no idea where to go next.

While there, the weaver struck up a conversation with a man whom he?d never met before. He told the man about the family?s plight. Hearing that they were homeless, the man invited them to live with him and his family in a large building which he is renovating. He offered to put the reconstruction on hold so that the family could move into the upper stories of his building.

The weaver was also fortunate to have known, for many years, a family that had sold his art work through a small shop in Islamabad. Women in this family have been working, as volunteers, to assist refugees who?ve come to Islamabad. They and their companions have delivered one thousand ?food kits,? plus cots, mats and cooking supplies, to desperately needy people. Two of the women, Fauzia and Ghazala, invited our small delegation to visit the weaver and his family, in Islamabad?s Bara Koh neighborhood.

When we arrived, older men and boys were outside, ready to unload a truck delivering mats and flour. The generous building owner invited members of our group into his home, on the ground floor, where plans were already being made to turn the top floor into a school for the children.

Several tots led me upstairs to meet their grandparents. The elderly couple sat, cross-legged, on cots. When we

entered, the grandmother stood, embraced me, and then softly wept for several minutes. Soon, about twenty men, women and children clustered around the cots. All listened attentively while one of the weaver?s brothers, Abdullah Shah, spoke with pride about the school in Fathepur where he had been a headmaster. The village had three schools, and his school was so successful that even Taliban families sent their children to study there. Now, the Taliban has destroyed all of the schools in Fathepur.

He and his brothers wonder what their future will be. How and when can they return to their village? And how will they start over? The crops are ruined, livestock have died, and land mines have been laid. Most of the shops and businesses have been destroyed. Many homes are demolished.

The trauma endured by the refugees is overwhelming. Yet, numerous individuals and groups have swiftly extended hospitality and emergency aid. We visited a Sikh community, in Hassan Abdal, which has taken in hundreds of Sikhs, housing them inside a large and very famous shrine. Nearby, we stayed for several days in Tarbela, where families in very simple dwellings have welcomed their relatives.

The townspeople quietly took up a collection to support the refugee families. Some of the townspeople accompanied us to Ghazi, just up the road from Tarbela, where 155 people are staying in an abandoned hospital, relying entirely on the generosity of their new neighbors. Doctors from Lahore invited two of us to go with them to villages near Mardan, where people from the Swat Valley are still arriving. The doctors were part of a project organized jointly through Rotary Lahore, Pakistan Medical Aid, and Jahandan, which has worked with area councils to convert schools into refugee centers. The doctors take turns, several times a week, delivering relief shipments and helping supervise distribution.

Generosity in the face of such massive displacement and suffering is evident everywhere we go. But Pakistan needs help on a much larger scale. The U.S. has pledged 100 million dollars toward relief efforts. Two other disclosures about money budgeted for Pakistan should be considered in light of the unbearable burdens borne by close to two million new refugees.

First is the decision to spend $800 million to renovate and expand the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad and to upgrade security at U.S. consular offices elsewhere in the country. Secondly, the U.S. will spend $400 million, in 2009, to teach counter-insurgency tactics to Pakistan?s military. The 2010 Defense Spending budget requests an additional 700 million for counter-insurgency training in Pakistan.

What would happen if U.S. officials put plans to expand the U.S. Embassy on hold? Suppose the U.S. were to declare that helping alleviate the misery of people forcibly displaced by Taliban violence and the recent military offensive is a top priority, one that trumps spending money on renovating and expanding the U.S. Embassy.

Suppose that the U.S. were to redirect funds designated to train counterinsurgents and instead make these funds available to help alleviate impoverishment in Pakistan. No one seems to know how the Taliban are funded, but they clearly use large sums of money to build their ranks, giving each new recruit 25,000 rupees, a sum that exceeds what a teacher earns in one year.

In villages where people don?t have enough resources to feed their children, the Taliban would initially move in with plans to build schools and offer two meals a day, plus clean clothes, to the children. Later, they would exercise increasingly fierce control over villages. But their initial forays into villages were marked by offers to reduce the gaps between ?haves and have-nots.?

Enormous resources will be spent to ?crush? the Taliban, and as always happens in warfare, the bloodshed will fuel acts of revenge and retaliation.

The relationship that began when a stranger took the risk of offering shelter to a weaver holds a lesson worth

heeding.

The weaver and his family will never forget the extraordinary, immediate kindness extended to them when a man put his renovation project on hold so that he could help them find shelter in his building.

The U.S. could help assure that every Pakistani family displaced by the fighting has enough to eat and the security of at least a temporary home. It would be an unusual but sensible homeland security initiative within Pakistan. And it would be a signpost pointing to greater security for the United States. The maxim that guides this idea is simple: to counter terror, build justice.

Build justice predicated on the belief that each person has basic human rights, and that we have a collective responsibility to share resources so that those rights are met. This means eliminating the unjust and unfair gap between the ?haves? and the ?have-nots.? It means weaving new relationships that don?t rely on guns and bombs for security.

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