

Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on  
Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs

# Responding to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Crisis in Pakistan

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Thank you, Senator Casey and distinguished members of the subcommittee for providing me with the opportunity to testify before you on the internally displaced persons (IDP) crisis in the Swat Valley and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. This is a phenomenon that poses a serious threat to Pakistan and ultimately to American security interests, but if handled correctly, can be an opportunity to promote them.

I am a journalist by training and have spent a great deal of time reporting on Pakistan's tribal belt and North West Frontier Province along the Afghan border. The views I express today are my own and not those of the U.S. Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

As you know, the crisis in Pakistan is by most metrics the biggest internal displacement in recent history. According to Pakistani officials and several U.N. agencies, the number of people forced to flee since fighting began this spring between Taliban militants and the Pakistani Army is more than two million. Most of these refugees fled to the neighboring districts of Mardan and Swabi, the closest and most accessible regions still unaffected by the fighting.

A lesser-known but equally critical fact is that less than 20 percent of the IDPs took shelter in the refugee camps set up by the government and aid organizations. Instead, the majority of the IDPs have sought refuge in the homes of local Pashtun "host" families. In many of the Pashtun villages in Mardan and Swabi, elders have assembled meetings and pooled resources to provide shelter for the IDPs from Swat, despite limited resources. Tellingly, these "host families" tend not to refer to the new guests as IDPs or refugees, but as community members entitled to the benefits of the centuries-long tradition of Pashtun hospitality.

The Pakistani government did a good job responding to this crisis, especially considering its limited resources -- which is why it was compelled to solicit international aid. Though, many Pakistanis have mixed feelings about the fair distribution of aid and some other aid related concerns. However, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of the people supported military operations in the Swat Valley.

Last month I went to Pakistan with the special envoy, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, as part of the presidential mission to look into the IDP crisis. I went with Ambassador Holbrooke to the IDP camps in Mardan and talked to a number of people residing there. After the official trip, I stayed on for few days to visit my hometown in District Mardan, where I saw first-hand the hospitality my own village people extended to IDPs from Swat. Lower and middle class families in Mardan and Swabi districts shared food, bedrooms and washrooms. When asked about the IDPs, even the poorest Pashtun in Mardan and Swabi said, "They are our guests. Don't call them IDPs. Don't call them refugees. It is part of our Pashtun tradition and culture to help them out."

And yet it was evident that hosting so many people has put an immense strain these predominantly poor communities. Meanwhile, most of the well-intentioned national and international aid is being directed towards camps serving only a small portion of the community in need, with too few resources reaching the communities absorbing the majority of the IDPs. Many fallacious reports underrepresented the number of IDPs living with the local host families, which has led to a lack of focus on communities as de-facto refugee camps.

One attempted means of reaching out to the overwhelming majority of the IDPs in need of aid was to employ the network of District Government system led by an elected district Nazim (mayor). But, it was not properly used because of an ongoing power struggle between the District Nazims and the bureaucracy.

Pakistani higher ups and international dignitaries paid visits to some of the camps which, in my opinion, were what I would call “VIP Camps” because they were set up as show-cases with all the necessary facilities and more than enough food, deliberately hiding the real situation on the ground.

Few of the influential people who have visited Pakistan have gone to see host families in order to thank them for their generosity in giving shelter to the IDPs in their moments of need. That said, this was a unique crisis in many ways: the sheer number of the displaced people, the speed of the mass exodus, and then the overwhelming response from the local people and the rest of Pakistan to support the displaced people.

The problems of the displaced people are both short-term and long-term. In the short-term, the problem was to provide immediate relief, especially shelter, food, drinking water, medicine, etc. That part will soon come to an end with the repatriation of the Swat IDPs. However, the long-term problem is a daunting task: the IDPs need rehabilitation in their hometowns and substantial help is needed to rebuild and reconstruct the damaged infrastructure.

IDPs started returning to their hometowns on July 13 and, according to official figures, over 600,000 individuals have so far been returned to Mingora, the capital of Swat, and to the adjacent areas in Swat and neighboring parts of Buner. However, the problem is still far from over.

## THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

As the intensity of military operation in the Swat valley winds down and the displaced people make their way back to their hometowns, the next phase involving the rehabilitation of the IDPs is expected to be as challenging as the first phase of immediate relief. The provincial government in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) has set up a Provincial Relief, Rehabilitation and Settlement Authority (PaRRSA) which, according to official statements, will be responsible for planning and coordinating the overall rehabilitation and resettlement of internally displaced persons and reconstruction of the areas affected by military operations. PaRRSA is part of the Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA)--a separate body already set up for dealing with the IDPs issue.

IDPs will face three immediate problems when returning and reaching their home areas:

1. Security
2. Economic development and employment
3. Education

## SECURITY: TALIBAN LEADERSHIP STILL AT LARGE

Of course, IDPs want to go back to their homes. They want to live again in the place that they lost to the Taliban militants. The Pakistani government has also been telling people that most areas have been cleared of militants and now they can go back to their homes. However, despite the government claims of clearing Swat from militants, many IDPs regard the situation as somehow deceptive -- people are still confused about whether to return or not, mainly because of the security concerns.

Repatriation of the IDPs to their hometowns will largely depend on the security situation. The Army claims that militants have been routed from most parts of Swat. Local journalists have confirmed that several important Taliban commanders have been killed and many had been arrested during the operation. According to them, however, the situation is still far from stable. Still, there are some pockets of resistance that scare the returning IDPs. Reports reaching Washington suggest that Taliban militants are still holding their positions in the Kabal area of Swat. However, the big concern raised by not only the IDPs but throughout Pakistan is the fate of the Taliban leadership.

If Maulana Fazlullah -- the Taliban leader in Swat -- and his top commanders are still at large and they are able to make headlines through their audio messages and sometime through their resurfaced illegal FM radio stations, then it will be hard for those IDPs who have gone back to safely live there, and next to impossible for those who are still in the camps and with host families to safely return.

A shortage of food and continuous curfew in many areas where people have recently returned are also serious problems. Curfews prevent people from leaving their homes after dark in Kabal, Matta, Kanjoo, even though a family member may have become seriously ill. When those still living in camps come to know about this situation, they will likely be frightened and reconsider returning.

Another problem, as I see it, is that many of the politicians and landlords with second homes in Islamabad or Peshawar have also left Swat in the wake of fighting and are not willing to go back. They are influential layers of society. If they do not return, the ordinary people will be unable to ward off the militants, especially when the top leadership of the Taliban is still intact.

Not only the people of Swat, but the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis has been demanding a more effective military operation against the Taliban so that the militants and their leadership do not find ways to flee the conflict areas and then filter back into Swat valley when quiet has returned. This is, I believe, a critical issue in the wake of unprecedented sacrifice by the IDPs.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYMENT

It is too early to assess the actual damages to economic development and employment. However, initial reports suggest large-scale destruction and robberies of businesses and homes. The government's initial figures mention losses to infrastructure at \$390 million. Crops have been ruined in many areas. According to local journalists, the Army has now told people not to grow the maize (corn) crop this season because it is used by the Taliban as cover to hide themselves in the

fields. But, people say they have no other means of ensuring sufficient food and if the government stops them from sowing maize and other food crops, then the government should support them with cash to support their families. In this situation, many people who go back to their homes in farming areas will not have jobs or crops in their fields. This is one of the most important areas to be addressed.

By some conservative estimates, the rehabilitation of the IDPs will cost billions of dollars. Earlier estimates mentioned by the government were over \$60 billion - both infrastructure and compensations. However, assessments are underway and new figures are yet to be made public. The government has provided IDPs families with ATM cards each worth \$312.00 (or equivalent of 25,000 Pakistani rupees) to get cash for their daily use. Twenty-five thousand Pakistani rupees is fine for a few days when a family goes back to its ruined home, but it cannot feed a family for any longer period of time. Many families have problems getting the cards because of wrong registration numbers, non-registration as IDPs, etc.

## EDUCATION

Close to 200 girls schools have been destroyed by the Taliban militants. This has left thousands of girls without any means of education. Reconstructing schools and providing security necessary for parents to be comfortable sending their daughters to school is significant project in its own right. Before the uptick in violence, around 70,000 to 80,000 girls were enrolled in schools in the Swat district. Following Taliban threats, many stopped going to school because of fear for their safety.

## IDPS CRISIS: THE U.S. RESPONSE

The United States has a good role model of 2005 earthquake in northern Pakistan and Kashmir when it act expediently and tactfully and found a favorable rating among Pakistanis for the first time in recent history. This spring, the U.S. was again presented with an opportunity to prove itself a positive force when the IDP crisis began in the north west of Pakistan. The United States has a much bigger opportunity today to improve its image in a region that is reeling under the deep-rooted anti-Americanism.

In my view the Obama administration realized the scope of the crisis quickly and its response thus far has been encouraging. President Obama's special envoy went twice to the region to see the IDP situation.

If local newspapers are to be believed, Ambassador Holbrooke spent more time in the refugee camps talking to the IDPs than the Pakistani ruling elites did. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a "Text Swat" SMS campaign – whereby you could text the word "SWAT" to the number "20222" and \$5 would be donated to the U.N. Pakistan Relief Fund to provide food, water, medicine, clothing, shelter, and other basic necessities to the IDPs.

These efforts are commendable, and to those in Pakistan that are aware of them, an example of the United States' capacity and inclination to render aid. Still, there is a persistent question of whether

the aid has been effective, especially whether it has gone to the right people.

It's pertinent to mention here that Nasim Ashraf, executive director of Pakistan Studies Center at the Middle East Institute, has been quoted in the media that he has conducted a survey about the IDPs and found that when they were asked if they had received any help from the U.S., 72 percent said "No." He was quoted in a news article saying, "The common man [in Pakistan] doesn't know that, you know, Secretary Clinton here has announced \$200 million [in aid] because they don't think that it ever gets there to them."

This is a big dilemma for the U.S. The people on the ground do not know about American aid. The Obama administration should work on how to reach out to the Pakistani people.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR THE BEST UTILIZATION OF U.S. AID

Winning hearts and minds of the Pakistani people will take years and will require long-term as well as short-term policies.

**Policing:** The United States should help the NWFP government develop community policing at the village level to give people a sense of security. There is an urgent need for a strong, well-trained and well-equipped police system in the Swat valley that can resist intimidation and overcome violence on the street. When the Taliban extended their writ in the Swat region few months back, the police force completely collapsed and put up no resistance. One sympathizes with the ill-prepared and ill-equipped policeman confronting the relatively well-equipped and adept Taliban fighters. There has already been an interest on the part of the U.S government in reforming the Pakistani police system. However, the fall of the Swat to the Taliban and now its takeover by the Pakistan Army makes it urgent to have a strong regular police force in the valley to protect the return of militancy. The Army can launch military operations at anytime, but its police responsibility is to maintain law and order and do the routine patrolling in the streets and keep a vigilant eye on miscreants and militants. The Pakistani government has decided to increase the number of police stations and police forces in Swat in order to fulfill the requirements of the people. The U.S. can assist in these efforts.

**Compensation:** The United States should help the Pakistani government and local NGOs to give a compensation package to the victims of military operations. The packages should include enough money to reconstruct damaged homes, restart businesses and meet the living requirements for a meaningful period of time as former IDPs get back on their feet. It should be much larger than the current amount of \$312 for a family that can range in size from four to eight and sometimes 10 members. Since Pakistani government officials have a trust problem due to the widespread accusations of corruption even in this humanitarian crisis, I suggest that it would be useful to involve local NGOs in Swat and the Malakand region to help conduct loss assessments and then involve local community leaders for the distribution of financial and other aid and rehabilitation support.

Schools, Hospitals, Roads: Most people are aware that the United States has been using drones and

missiles in the tribal region to target and attack militant hideouts. The attacks also incur collateral damage -- loss of lives and injuries to innocent civilians including women and children. As a part of the rehabilitation of the IDPs, the United States should help rebuild schools and hospitals destroyed by the Taliban militants. This will be a great help to the people of war-hit areas of Swat and other parts of the tribal region. The U.S. should also help the Pakistani government rebuild the destroyed buildings from the Swat conflict on an accelerated basis.

**Microfinance/banking:** With the help of the Pakistani government and NGOs, the U.S. can also help launch microfinance banking facilities for the people of Swat and FATA to create sustainable livelihood opportunities, including support farmers, small industries and skill development programs for men and women. Local NGOs can be involved in the interest-free loans for launching small businesses.

**Local Pashtun Media:** Establishing, promoting and encouraging local Pashtun media is needed at this time. In the absence of a strong local Pashtun media, people of Swat and FATA have become “captive audience” to the Taliban pirated FM radio stations. Fazlullah’s FM radio station, which earned him the nickname “FM Mullah,” contributed to the fall of Swat into the hands of the Taliban. A local independent Pashtun media is necessary to provide alternative radio stations and content that people will want to listen to. This will also help improve the U.S. image in the long run by engaging Pashtuns in the political discourse. A Pashtun media would ultimately support Pashtun nationalism, which is one way to help combat Taliban militancy. I would argue that a Pashtun social movement is needed to raise the voices for their identity, culture and heritage – which are the anti-thesis of the Taliban.

**Cultural/Sports:** This area has long been ignored by the successive Pakistani regimes as well as international donors. There is a lack of sports and cultural facilities for the youth of Tribal region and many parts of NWFP. But this is one of the potential area in which a long term investment can stop the drift of young people to extremism. The revival of secular Pashtuns’ culture and traditions is must for stopping the march of Taliban in the border region.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I salute the IDPs and the rest of the Pakistani people, particularly the Pashtuns of Mardan and Swabi for their sacrifices in helping the IDPs. I must say that the future of the war against terrorism in Pakistan now depends more profoundly than anyone expected on how well the situation of IDPs is addressed. If properly treated, these Pashtuns can be a bulwark against Taliban militants, irrespective of their ethnic background. The Pashtuns have long been accused as the supporters and sympathizers of Taliban and al-Qaida militants. However, because of the IDP crisis that position has changed and now they should be regarded as the bulwark against militants. I wish and pray that all the people of Swat, Buner and other parts of the Tribal region will return to their homes and once again start living a peaceful life in their valley once known as Switzerland of Pakistan. Being a Pashtun myself, I would like to believe that one day these IDPs will say that during their most difficult times, not only the whole of Pakistan but the world, stood with them.

Thank you. I look forward to answering your questions.



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