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Balochistan: Caught between Winter, Earthquake, Politics & Insurgency

The First Response: On October 29, a deadly earthquake hit areas of Balochistan around the historical and scenic city of Ziarat. It killed nearly 200 people and injured thousands and displaced close to 20,000 people in an area where temperature in winters falls to -5 Celsius. The Balochistan Chief Minister, Nawab Muhammad Aslam Raisaani, quickly reached the affected area and camped himself to personally oversee the aid activities to the victims. Another good gesture that will be remembered for a long time was huge aid effort by the Punjab Chief Minister, Mian Shahbaz Sharif. Along with the relief goods, he provided Rs. 100 million in cash and announced that Punjab government was willing to contribute even further as the demanded. Many government officials including the Advisor on Interior, Chairman Senate and a number of Federal and State Ministers have visited the place. Pakistan Army also mobilized a great number of its planes and helicopters along with moving Rangers and Frontier Constabulary contingents in the area to help the people. With the initial response from the Federal and Provincial governments and Pakistan Army, it looked that the grievances of the earthquake victims will be rightly addressed.

Aid Embezzled: The reports of embezzlements in the aid dispensation started to pour in by the end of the first week of November. Many victims protested against the unavailability of the relief goods and blamed the local level government officials for "swindling the relief goods." The provincial government conceded on November 13 that there were problems in providing aid and relief to a few areas and people were there left at the mercy of nongovernment organization or the victims were helping themselves. Many representatives of the civil society and nongovernment organizations also suggested that the aid effort be properly monitored and checked to help stopping the leakages but not much improvement is observed. The rehabilitation process of the displaced persons is also proving harder as the bitter winter is setting in. Various members of the ruling coalition have also demanded from the Chief Minister that complete audit and accountability process should be executed on all the aid and relief goods along with those handing cash among the ranks of civilian and military officials.

Political Heat: Provincial Minister for Agriculture, Mir Asadullah Baloch, in mid November chanted slogans on the floor of the house that Balochistan "should be given independence from Pakistan" because it had failed to help the province and the Baloch people. He said that the province should be given complete autonomy over its resources and Pakistan's behavior with Balochistan was excessively discriminatory. Asadullah's remarks were met with a sharp reaction from the provincial legislators of PPP and PML-Q and they demanded that his membership of the parliament should be finished. Later on the PPP leader, Mir Sadiq Umrani, criticized Asadullah for using Balochistan Assembly's floor for his "political nonsense."

Business with Separatists: As opposed to the warmth and goodwill that was observed in early September between the separatists and Islamabad, the situation has deteriorated with a serious deficit of trust between the provincial government and the insurgents. On November 15, skirmishes with Frontier Constabulary in Awaran killed a Baloch activist Noor Muhammad and the government's firepower also injured four others. After this incident, the Baloch Liberation Army levied complete responsibility on the government and said that his men only reacted when they were attacked. Subsequent to this clash, former Chairman of Baloch Students Organization (BSO), Dr. Allah Nazar and central secretary general of BSO, Zakir Majeed were arrested in suspicion of supporting the insurgents. These incidents have brought both sides to a situational jam with dwindling chances of any meaningful rapprochement.

Economy of Debt: The deficiency of vital funds available with the Government of Balochistan echoed in the Balochistan Assembly in early November when the provincial minister for irrigation, Sardar Muhammad Aslam Bizenjo said that the government had no money for new projects. "The loan amount has risen to 100 billion from 25 billion only four years ago," he said. It was hoped that the Federal Government will help bailing out the provincial government but Islamabad itself is under immense fiscal pressure and it would be hard to get any additional support or aid from the center. The slow pace of development in Balochistan will further alienate the Baloch people from Pakistan and the

Federal Government's initial initiative seems to be losing its steam over the past few weeks.

Since independence, no government had ever formed a directed policy to address the issues of the province. Each government came and left with hollow claims and the province and people living in it are just suffering. With Balochistan caught up in natural and manmade crises, the Federal Government must demonstrate wisdom and a proactive approach to resolve the problems that people are facing.