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The day after

ISLAMISTS AND WESTERN RELIEF AGENCIES BATTLE
FOR HEARTS AND MINDS AFTER PAKISTAN'S
APOCALYPTIC EARTHQUAKE

I STINK. IT'S been four days since I washed, working and sleeping in the same army fatigues since getting here. From the tent that is my home in the village of Ambor, just outside the town of Muzafarabad, capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, I'm trying to help with the relief efforts after the most devastating earthquake to hit South Asia in recent years. A young man called Yasir Khan has walked into my tent. He pauses, searching for the words:

"The earthquake happened during the month of Ramadhan, and I was fasting. I woke up early to eat before dawn, but then I could not get back to sleep. In my heart I felt that something was wrong. I went to the kitchen and found my mother there, preparing the spices for dinner, when we would break our fast at dusk. I said to her, "Ama, I cannot sleep. Something bad is going to happen." She told me that I was playing too much and that I should be studying,

so I went to my room. I could not work, could not read. I felt like listening to some music. Just as I pressed the button on my radio, the earth shook.

Suddenly there was a terrible noise. The ceiling was cracking and falling all around me. I did not know what was going on. I ran to the kitchen and called out to my mother: "Ama, Ama! Run, run!" I ran out of the house before I realised my mother was still inside, so scared was she. I ran back in and started pulling her out; she was crying. The walls were collapsing, I could not see anything, the corridor was moving from side to side. I closed my eyes because of the dust and had to feel my way out. Then we fell on the ground in the garden and our house collapsed in front of us.

I thought to myself: Allah, what sin have we committed against you, for you to do this to us? We are good people, honest people.

Why did you punish us like this? I felt so small, like a little chick with its mother. My mother and I held on to each other. Everywhere around us houses were falling, people screaming, children crying. Someone performed the adzan (call for prayer). We were all crying to God, begging him to stop. Then suddenly it stopped. Our village was destroyed and there was chaos everywhere. I sit quietly before Yasir and he looks out, lively eyes seeming to stare at something in the distance. The tent that hangs above our heads – Chinese-made and olive-green in colour, more suited for an army field camp than to shelter a family – is the only thing that is keeping us warm. Yasir and his family have been living in their tent since last October, when the massive earthquake destroyed the livelihood of thousands in Muzafarabad, while killing an untold number of victims.

ONE IS TEMPTED to describe the victims of the Kashmiri earthquake as 'innocent', yet there exists an irony that is all too obvious in this. How can the victims of any natural disaster be innocent? That would imply a culpability of sorts, an element of agency in an event where agency was totally absent. Accidents claim victims, innocent or otherwise, without discrimination. Yet the survivors invariably feel a sense of responsibility for the event itself, and along with the relief that comes with the thought of being spared comes an even more uncomfortable sense of guilt for having survived. Yasir's discomfort gnaws at him as he continues his story:

"You know sir, I felt very bad after that. You know why? My aunt was staying in the middle of the city and there was no-one to look after her. Right after the quake had stopped I told my mother to calm down and I ran all the way to Muzafarabad to see if my aunt was all right. As I went, I ran past so many houses with people trapped in them: "Help us, help us please – we are trapped in here." But I could not stop; I had to rescue my aunt in the city. I cried all the way as I ran. But I was too late. My aunt's house had collapsed completely and she was crushed. Whenever I am alone I hear the voices of those people asking me to help them. They won't stop crying to me."

Yasir's is just one story. The area around Muzafarabad today is a surreal landscape of destroyed houses, cracked roads, broken bridges and expansive tent-camps where thousands of lives have been put on hold. Like a nomadic settlement whose existence remains on probation (the authorities repeatedly threaten to close down the tent-camps and force the people to go back to rebuild their houses in the villages or the mountains), an all-pervading sense of contingency hangs in the air. The earth still shakes and occasionally the mountains tremble. One can no longer have faith in the solidity of things, even the earth beneath one's feet.

Life here has been turned inside-out. Tumbling through the rubble and ruins of houses, one comes across their contents laid out in the streets, as if the houses were performing some kind of macabre strip-tease exposing the lives of their former inhabitants, odds and ends everywhere, obscure and seemingly unimportant objects abandoned in haste and now laden with meaning. I spy a solitary shoe and wonder where the other is. A child's notebook lies open with an unfinished sentence hanging mid-page, inviting the reader to complete it. There is a radio that has lost its outer casing but still works, remarkably. I hear music and then realise that the song on air is the recent hit by the rock group Korn,

'Twisted Transistor'. No, this was too surreal for comfort.

Ramshackle schools made of tents and tin-sheets have been set up and the children are back to work. Though a handful of schools were left standing, the children refuse to go into them for fear that another earthquake will bring them down too. Many children witnessed the deaths of their schoolmates, for the quake had hit in the early hours of the morning just when the first classes had begun. With gestures both poignant and defiant, the children gambol and play amidst the ruins, as if conscious of the fact that they have survived the onslaught of some great unseen beast and were now dancing on its shattered corpse.

For the elders, however, the loss and the trauma afterwards have been more difficult to accept. A wizened Kashmiri, his dusty shawl wrapped over lean bony shoulders, shrugs: 'What can we do? It's all gone now. Every family has lost someone. None of us was spared. I saw my friend, as old as myself, go mad as he put together the pieces of his child after the body was dragged out of the ruins. We were in hell. It was everyone for himself. Nobody could help you because everyone had to look after his own and what was left. My friend was left with no-one. His child was dead and he wanted to bury the boy, but he had no tools. Not even a shovel. So he dug the grave with a spoon. It took him two days, as the ground was hard. When it was over he could not cry anymore; he had nothing left in him.'

The ground cracked and the mountains split open, throwing Jurassic boulders into the sky, crushing human lives in a blink. No statistical study can account for the dehumanising effects of such a calamity, nor the scale of the pain that was spread among all and sundry. Houses can be rebuilt, bridges repaired, roads reconstructed. But no degree of aid can erase memories of primordial horrors unleashed by the quake's violence.

Young Yasir has his share of sensate memories that will not go away. His eyes light up suddenly, animated by some mysterious confessional need to share his experience: 'You know what, sir?' he asks, half-smiling. 'One week after the earthquake, if you had put a piece of human flesh, chicken flesh and other animal flesh next to each other in front of me, I could tell you which one was human. For more than one week that was the only thing we could smell. Bodies everywhere sir, you cannot imagine. It was too much terrible, too much terrible. Too much.'

CALAMITY TO EXCESS, excess to overdetermination. The earthquake has become a signifier for a plethora of anxieties and fears, some collective, others private. One cannot explain it. 'Why?' Is the question on everyone's lips: 'Why us? Why here? Why now?' The geologists collate their data, but numbers do not and cannot foreclose radical contingency. The politicians make their promises, but they cannot undo the past or bring the dead back to life. But there are those whose narrow logic offers a straight path that is best walked with blinkers: the Jihadis.

'They were bad Muslims and they did not implement the Sharia, that is why God has smitten them and brought them low.' Hafeez Saeed's words sound a tad too well-choreographed to ring true, like a bad script. But his lack of virtuoso is made up for by his accoutrements and style: Black fluffy beard overflowing, dark-set eyes framed by heavy brows that look decidedly unfamiliar in these parts. He is not a local Kashmiri but a Pathan from the North-West Frontier Province and he is here along with the other Islamist groups that were once the biggest suppliers of would-be martyrs for the Jihad against India.

Kashmir was their battleground, their stomping field, their staging post. And Muzafarabad was once known as the main supply depot, training centre and rallying point for myriad Jihad organisations bearing names befitting their combustible demeanour: Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e Tayeaba, etc. Up to 2003, it would not have been too unusual to meet Hafeez in the streets with a Kalashnikov in hand and perhaps a rocket-propelled grenade or two. Today, he wears an armband signalling his membership of an Islamist relief group.

The Islamists have descended upon Muzafarabad in full force, though in a sense they never really left. The gun-totting militants of the not-too-distant past have opted for a new look altogether – that of relief workers, NGO activists, medical aid practitioners and rescuers – but their discourse and vocabulary still bear traces of their previous avatars.

Picking up the leaflets dropped over the town by the Islamist groups, one gets to see their trite logic in all its skewed, technicolour glory. Some pamphlets allege that the earthquake was the result of an underground nuclear explosion, detonated by ever-nefarious India next door. Others claim that the quake was God's judgement on the sinful people of Kashmir who had not embraced the Jihadi movement with open arms. The Islamists are there to provide the truth and the way out: Jihad against India and the creation of the Islamic state of Jammu and Kashmir, as part of the global Muslim Caliphate.

The powers that be in Islamabad bemoan the fact that even an earthquake on the scale of the one last October could not dislodge the Jihadis from their Kashmiri stronghold. But nobody can deny the fact that the Islamists were the first on the scene, and that their activists were the bravest, toughest and most committed of the rescuers. Stories abound of how Islamist activists threw themselves on the rubble of Muzafarabad and dug the victims out, tooth and nail.

Armed with little more than their faith in their struggle, they scaled the mountains of Kashmir and were the first to reach the most isolated villages in the upper regions. They were the first to use donkeys and mules to get to villages that were cut off by broken roads. They were the first to construct their own makeshift rafts and to transport much needed medicine and supplies to villages upriver, braving the glacial waters of the great Jhelum and Krishna Ganga rivers that run through the valley.

As I walk through the tent-camps, I come across the familiar flags of the Islamist groups: The Jamaat'e Islami are here, as are the Jamaat'ul-Dawa. The blue and green pennants flutter over every tent they have constructed, like tiny medieval camps belonging to different armies sitting next to each other. Make no mistake about it: this is a turf war being fought in earnest. The Islamists may be united in their common hatred of India and all things Western, but this is matched only by their incessant rivalry against one another.

The Jamaat-e Islami have set up a food distribution centre where chapatis and rotis are distributed along with Jamaat-related propaganda material. Right across the road is a Jamaat'ul-Dawa field clinic with equipment so modern that even the government's own relief camps and field hospitals seem backward in comparison. After the catastrophe, the real battle for hearts and minds had begun. Western donor agencies like Medicins Sans Frontiers, Diakonie and the Red Cross were there too, but they could not offer the salvation and heavenly reward promised by the Mullahs.

In the midst of this, I am left bewildered. Where is the state? What is the Pakistani government doing? I am told that a Pakistani army relief camp was in the neighbouring district of Chikar, and I could visit it by jeep if I wanted to. Eager to see what the Pakistani army is up to, I accept the offer.

The road to Chikar takes one all the way to Srinagar and runs parallel to the great Jhelum river whose icy waters run down in angry torrents. What was once a two-lane mountain road is now reduced to a single lane path with chunks ripped off the mountainside and fed to the river below. The driver shouts to me as he speeds on at close to 90kph: 'We are sorry that our roads are so bad! The earthquake destroyed our roads and everything is broken. How are the roads in Malaysia?' he asks me. 'Don't worry,' I answer. 'Malaysian roads also break apart, even without earthquake. We have special Malaysian technology for that.' 'Acha?' the driver replies. 'Very special country, Malaysia!' ■