

Pakistan, Russia and Haiti

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This year began with an earthquake in Haiti that devastated that already poor country. At the time, the world responded with an outpouring of support. Governments from all over the world offered support, private charities and individuals in the U.S. and elsewhere gave money and sought to be helpful. The earthquake was a terrible blow to a country that was direly unequipped to handle it, but the world responded, at least initially, in a sympathetic and appropriate way. Haiti is still reeling from the damage from the earthquake as a full recovery will take years, but the international response to the earthquake helped substantially. In addition to receiving assistance from most corners of the world, Haiti became part of the global consciousness as people talked about it, sought ways to help and were genuinely concerned for the people suffering because of that earthquake.

Less than seven months after the Haiti earthquake, two other disasters have received far less global support and attention. The fire and heat related problems in Russia are not on the same scale as Haiti, but Pakistan may yet be of a similar scale. In both cases, the relative lack of international concern and sympathy, while not exactly surprising, is still notable. Neither of these incidents have made it to the front pages of American newspapers; public officials are not calling for helping the people of these two countries; and few ordinary people that do not have family or roots in Pakistan or Russia seem to be very concerned about these disasters.

The reasons for this are not just limited to the relative size of these disasters, but are also because of the countries in which they are occurring and the nature of the disaster itself. Haiti is an almost textbook example of a third world country cursed by poverty, bad governance and a very tough history. It is also a relatively small and powerless country which poses little or no threat to anybody. All of these things make it a very easy country for which to feel sympathy and support.

Russia and Pakistan are different kinds of countries. They are both big powerful countries with complicated relationships with the west, particularly the U.S. Russia is important to the U.S, and a potential partner on several issues, but also has a belligerent relationship with several of its neighbors and is run by a government that is increasingly authoritarian. Pakistan is, of course, at the center of the U.S. anti-terrorism campaign. We are used to thinking about Pakistan with regard to whether or not it is making it easier for the U.S. to combat terrorism, not in terms of human suffering and natural disasters.

Russia and Pakistan are both also poorly governed, but it is not as easy for donors to step into service delivery roles in these countries as they did in Haiti. The Russian leadership has an ambiguous relationship with international donors and does not want to be viewed

as being somehow similar to Haiti, but the lack of shared information and strong government response has made this disaster worse for the Russian people. The central government in Pakistan is very weak, but still not ready to cede too much to relief agencies, while many western countries are wary of any further involvement in that part of the world.

The nature of the disaster also makes a response more difficult. An earthquake is a specific, stand-alone event. Everybody can understand it and see why it is so devastating. The floods in Pakistan don't quite have this character. Although it is estimated to have affected several million people, the flood does not have the drama and clarity of an earthquake or even a tsunami.

Russia has been hit by a heat wave that has led to forest fires, widespread toxic smog in Moscow, and people dying from the heat in various parts of the country. Rather than a specific event having a strong impact in one or two parts of Russia, much of the country seems engulfed in some kind of Miltonian stew of heat, smoke, fire and death. It is less apparent, however, what those seeking to help the Russian people can do. There is no simple way to cool the country down or disperse the smog. There is also an unfortunate irony that Russia, a country that is etched in the American consciousness for its cold winters is now suffering from summer heat.

The politics and logistics of supporting Haiti look simple compared to Russia and Pakistan. As a poor, small state that shares an island with one other country, thinking through how to support Haiti was doable. The same is not true for Russia and Pakistan. Unfortunately, global climate change and poor governance will likely conspire to make disasters like the ones in Pakistan and Russia more frequent over the next decades, so getting the international response right will only become more important.