

Field Report from Pakistan

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety. Six months ago, floodwaters submerged a fifth of Pakistan, affecting nearly 20 million lives. And while an ill-equipped Pakistani government struggled to cope with the devastation, NGOs and charities stepped up.

One such group is Jamaat-ud-Dawa, or JuD, an Islamist group. In 2008, the UN declared the JuD a front group for the Lashkar-e-Taiba or LeT. It's believed to be behind the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks. While the LeT is now banned in Pakistan, the JuD is not. And in the aftermath of the floods, some desperate Pakistanis accepted their aid.

"If these guys were helping out, why stop them?"

This was a question many asked, according to Ayesha Siddiq, a military affairs expert.

"And, a lot of people making these arguments are not necessarily militant or Islamist. But the Pakistani state has to deal with the consequences which is that they will have more influence and more popularity."

In some villages, the group has rebuilt eight to ten homes through its humanitarian wing, the Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation, or FIF. It's a registered charity in Pakistan. Its coordinators say it is independent of the politics of JuD. But, FIF coordinator Mohammad Khalid admits both groups are overseen by the same man. His name is Hafiz Muhammad Saeed. In 2008, the UN declared him a terrorist.

Despite the association, the Pakistani government has failed to shut down these organizations. That's because the civilian government is weak and the Pakistani military—which backs these groups—is strong.

Samina Ahmed, the South Asia Project Director for International Crisis Group, explains.

"The civilian elected government does not control national security policy. It does not control security defense internal issues. You certainly have the military, the security arm of the state, supporting these groups. It supports them and its helped them and its allowed them to operate with impunity largely because it sees these groups as a strategic asset."

Ahmed says they have used their work to gain publicity.

"Particularly in areas where they already had a presence it was easy for them to reach out to their own supporters and also to gain a media profile that's much larger than the presence they had or to provide it assistance. So in some ways, they were very sophisticated in their use of the media."

Villagers say that since the group began working here, a mullah has been coming regularly. Analysts say these groups typically use religious education for ideological indoctrination. But residents say, so far, they haven't been talking politics.

FIF has also been working among the Hindu community. One woman, Sakshi, says they felt obliged to pray.

"Our kids are starving to death. We were all hungry and everything comes from money and nobody here had any money, so we figured we should pray so at least we can get food to eat, and get some ration for the kids."

Sakshi is also afraid she won't get food or rations.

"We were worried so, we did whatever they said. They said we'll get the tents and we're bringing rations and we'll give them to everyone."

FIF, it appears, is concerned about two things: building a positive media image and pushing their brand of Islam. Ahmed says their media strategy has been successful and these groups will continue to exist.

"In this nascent democratic transition in Pakistan, until the civilian elected government has the capacity to make and implement policy, we will see these groups given that space to operate."

That's why, she says, supporting democracy in Pakistan is critical to ending military support for these groups. But, she's less worried about them actually expanding their reach with flood relief. The key concerns for flood survivors, she says, center on bread and butter issues—not religion or politics.

"The jihadi groups have used many means to project their image as being far more capable in delivering assistance than was the reality. If you're in desperate needs of food, of shelter, of health facilities, and someone is there to give it to you, quite obviously, there's a huge opportunity for the jihadi groups. Are people receptive to their ideological message is another matter."

—Reported by Madiha Tahir for America Abroad.