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## Pakistan: Shelter for earthquake survivors involves more than tents

Overcoming a slow start, the Government of Pakistan and international aid organizations are mobilizing many resources to meet the shelter and other needs of victims of the October 8 earthquake.

Initially the response focused on tents to provide temporary shelter for the 3.3 million displaced people who lived in the 450,000 homes destroyed by the earthquake. While 480,000 tents have been delivered, agencies have since determined that 85–90 % of the tents are unsuitable for the harsh winters in the mountains of Pakistan. Retrofitting and insulating the tents with millions of blankets are currently underway.

While tents were the immediate focus, it quickly became apparent that there are equally effective alternatives, including supporting communal housing in public buildings that withstood the earthquake, supporting host families, and supplying prefabricated units. In some areas there are community-wide rebuilding programs already underway to provide cash for work to rebuild houses and infuse much needed cash into the local economy. (See the Refugees International bulletin, “Pakistan: Quick Cash Payments Speed Earthquake Repair,” <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/>)

For the highest and most inaccessible regions agencies developed a program called “Operation Winter Race,” which involved the airlifting by helicopter of materials and food to sites that often did not have a place to land. In these areas, construction of warm rooms has been the primary approach to allow people to get through the winter season. This involves the use of recycled materials from fallen buildings, coupled with delivered roofing materials, blankets, stoves. Many people are spontaneously rebuilding without external assistance and are incorporating the debris from their damaged homes and other locally available materials.

The promotion of the construction of warm rooms, in close proximity to the original home, with outside

support wherever possible, is the key strategy for assisting people to survive the bitter winter. The Government of Pakistan, donor countries, and international relief agencies are united in promoting this strategy, which gives the survivors of the earthquake a measure of control over the immediate rebuilding process.

A major goal of the shelter program is to insure that people will be safe and able to remain in their home villages whenever practical. Many earthquake survivors want to remain in their home villages to guard their homestead and livestock and to rebuild as soon as possible. The strategy of supporting people in their home villages also prevents a large-scale migration to lower altitudes, which would create severe management problems since space, capacity, and logistics are insufficient to care for an influx of more families.

In the spring, the Government of Pakistan plans to move from providing emergency shelter kits towards funding a self-help rebuilding effort through grants to individual families. While this plan is sound conceptually, its implementation faces a number of potential challenges. The existing supply chain for building supplies, which relies on earthquake damaged roads, is severely clogged and helicopter airlifts will remain a prime method of distribution in many higher regions. Procurement of emergency supplies is far from complete, which will delay implementation and lead to possible competition for scarce transport space once supplies are needed for reconstruction.

There are also challenges in terms of the ability of the most vulnerable to receive the support they need. Potential obstacles include family and village social structures that work against equal access for the vulnerable, as well as

the rising costs of building materials, which may make it difficult for the poorest families to afford to rebuild. Cash strapped survivors may utilize some of the reconstruction allowances to survive the winter, leaving them with few funds to reconstruct their homes and restart their lives.

The viability of village life depends on more than shelter. Many villagers are concerned about the security of their land ownership and this will be compounded in the recovery and rebuilding phase. Their livelihoods have been massively disrupted. Programs to support livestock and agricultural development will be critical to achieving food security in advance of the winter of 2006-2007.

#### **REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:**

- The Government of Pakistan, donors, and implementing partners allocate funds and resources to construct sufficient, quality housing for families so that people enter the winter of 2006-2007 housed in acceptable shelter;
- Donors release pledged and allocated funds immediately to allow partner organizations to procure and distribute materials to insure that reconstruction programs can begin on time in the spring;
- The Government and implementing partners develop specific plans to identify and serve the most vulnerable individuals and families, insuring that they are housed appropriately and that they receive other forms of assistance as needed;
- The Government begin mid-term planning for the winter of 2006-2007, with particular focus on insuring that winterized housing is available to all who require it.
- The Government, donors, and implementing partners support livelihood revitalization programs, with particular focus on livestock and agriculture, to meet survivors' recovery needs and prevent further displacement.

*Refugees International Director of Operations Michael McIntyre assessed the situation in the earthquake-affected areas of Pakistan in mid-November.*