

The Muslim countries have helped

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The OIC's Secretary-General, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, convened an emergency coordination meeting of relief organisations of the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference) countries in Islamabad on August 29, and Pakistan's foreign minister attended as co-chair. In a press conference following this he faced criticism that the OIC and the Islamic Countries relief response was not up to expectations.

Is this true? Otherwise we would be discouraging rather than encouraging the Islamic countries and the OIC. The fact of the matter is that the criticism is not new. Earlier foreign media reports reprinted here deplored that the OIC countries were not stepping up to assist compared to western countries.

This criticism came when Saudi Arabia had announced a fund-raising drive initiated by the king pledging at least \$100 million, and when within 48 hours of Pakistan's international appeal a Saudi C-130 air bridge of four daily C-130 flights with relief goods had started. Even Afghanistan, beset by internal strife, has donated \$1 million and sent four helicopters for relief work. Planes and helicopters from Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt are already active in the field or are on the way

The conference pulled together some 29 Islamic relief organisations, some already working in Pakistan, as well as 30 local NGOs. This was stage two of the OIC coordination response since within two days of the international appeal the organisation had called a meeting of ambassadors to the OIC in Jeddah urging member states and their institutions to contribute.

The Secretary-General explained that the OIC unlike the developed world originally had no disaster relief coordination mechanism. Recently a department for humanitarian affairs was set up for this purpose and its office will soon open in Islamabad to coordinate the relief effort with the Pakistan government, the UN agencies working here as well as civic society.

So far, around \$163 million in cash and kind has been pledged by the OIC states. The Islamic Development Bank, which gave \$500 million concessional funding for reconstruction after the 2005 earthquake, has already given \$1.2 million as a grant for Islamic NGOs and another \$10 million on soft terms.

The IDB delegation announced that after the disaster-needs assessment was completed the bank will give another \$500-700 million in concessional funding over three years for reconstruction and sustaining other ongoing activities to mitigate the impact of this floods disaster and to enhance resilience. The foreign Islamic NGOs have also pledged a substantial amount for relief. However, as these NGOs are partly funded by contributions from their governments and partly from public donations we should wait to quantify this additional assistance. Therefore we should count on an estimated floor for Islamic relief and rehabilitation assistance of some \$700 million which hopefully could eventually rise to above \$900 million.

During the World War II when Stalin was asked to take into account the moral force of the Papacy, he responded by asking "how many divisions does the Pope have?". The OIC in terms of the collective will of the Ummah, which it stands for, and in terms of the funding available for the secretariat of the organisation has many weaknesses. This has been a continuing failure due to lack of political will amongst all the OIC member states despite good intentions. It is reflected in inadequate funds for the body and its activities and the fact that it has not been able to pull its weight on the world stage.

Nonetheless, the OIC is the one forum where Pakistan finds full support for the Kashmiri cause and condemnation against India's oppression and occupation of Kashmir. It is also a platform where Kashmiri leaders on both sides of this unjust and unsustainable divide are invited to participate.

No doubt the OIC countries can and should do more and match the IDB loans but we should welcome and recognise that they have begun to do their bit to demonstrate Islamic solidarity and stand by the people of Pakistan in its hour of need.

The writer is a retired diplomat who headed the Foreign Office's emergency relief cell following the 2005 earthquake