[**A turbulent world**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1696962/a-turbulent-world)

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FOLLOWING a visit to Gayan, one of the areas in Afghanistan’s Paktika province hit by last week’s earthquake, a foreign correspondent posted an evocative photograph. A group of sun-dappled Afghan men stand around a bowl of ripe, tempting apricots. The journalist tweeted in praise of Afghan hospitality, explaining that the men were insisting that the media crew have one apricot each. This, despite surviving one of the worst earthquakes in decades, which has left a 1,000 people dead, and over 1,500 injured.

The journalist is not alone in highlighting the beauty of humanity amidst the earthquake’s toll. Social media is littered with images of Afghans from neighbouring villages rushing to the aid of the affected, or of street children putting their meagre earnings into donation boxes. They are meant to soothe the pain of tragedy, but instead serve to romanticise it, glossing over the horrors, and once again putting a false sense of hope in ‘resilience’ — that dreaded euphemism used to describe people who plod on because they have no choice.

Such nuggets prevent us from accepting the real extent of the disaster in Afghanistan. The earthquake was the last thing Afghans needed when their country is facing a humanitarian and economic collapse. Quake survivors were rushed to hospitals that lack funding, equipment or medicine. Those who made it out will resume life in horrifying circumstances. The UN says 97 per cent of Afghans will live below the poverty line this year, and half the population is food insecure.

And while the Taliban has used the earthquake as an opportunity to demonstrate its capacity to govern — organising relief flights to transport survivors to urban hospitals, promising compensation for victims’ families — the overall picture is bleak. Women’s rights are curtailed, girls remain out of schools, the media is muzzled, and former government officials and other Taliban opponents go missing, are tortured or killed. Minorities remain under threat, as evidenced by the Kabul gurdwara attack.

Afghanistan is not the only country facing a crisis.

Sadly, Afghanistan is not the only country facing such appalling humanitarian and economic conditions, though it is among the worst. A global food shortage is upon us, driven by climate change and fuelled by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Up to 1.6 billion people cannot be sure of getting enough to eat, and hundreds of millions face famine. In Somalia, children are dying of starvation. With weather-related disasters increasing five-fold over the past 50 years, such horrifying conditions will replicate elsewhere.

But there is little acknowledgement of this reality. Each natural disaster or climate change-induced crisis is framed as an isolated event. The failure to holistically narrate the climate crisis in a way that makes people understand its scale and urgency is increasingly understood. But a narrative of shocking global inequality is also missing.

For while the people of Paktika face calamity after calamity, global wealth remains concentrated among 1pc of the world population. Extreme inequality is creating conditions where any crisis — earthquakes, or supply chain shocks — can prove fatal for the world’s poorest and most vulnerable. But this is a big picture no one feels like drawing.

Pakistan was quick to offer support for the earthquake victims, with the NDMA supplying tents, blankets and medication. This isolated effort is palatable, even welcome. But the same Pakistanis praying for Afghanistan’s calamity-hit are moaning about the one-time ‘super tax’ that has been levied on Pakistan’s top-performing industries, many of which have until recently enjoyed record profits. This measure has provoked outrage, and accusations against the government of kowtowing to the IMF at the expense of econ­o­mic productivity.

The focus on the (de)merits of IMF bailouts is distracting from the broader argument: that the current global system of wealth distribution is untenable.

A few people are too affluent, their interests mutually assured by a cadre of cynical elites in politics, law-enforcement, and even the judiciary. And too many people are completely helpless, literally starving and dying, with only social media aphorisms to acknowledge their plight.

This cannot last. Desperation of the scale that the quake will leave behind in Paktika can only result in political unrest and conflict. We need another approach.

While the super tax may have its flaws, the broader principle of fairer taxation — including stemming tax dodging by corporates that costs poor countries $100bn each year — is the obvious start, to unlock state funds for health, education and infrastructure. From that will flow the critical need for the freedoms, systems and institutions — from free courts to media to civil society organisations — that ensure public accountability. The only way forward from the extreme horrors of today, is to get back to basics.

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