**Disaster diplomacy**

Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani

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Eighteen years ago, on October 5, 2005 Pakistan faced a natural disaster in the form of a terrible earthquake that shook many parts of the country, including the capital city of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Muzaffarabad, Bagh, Balakot and the surrounding areas.

As a result of this earthquake, countless villages were affected, and around 87,000 people lost their lives. Similarly, numerous houses, roads, hospitals, buildings, education institutions and infrastructure were severely damaged.

During this great tragedy in our national history, Turkiye was the first country that came forward to help us. A medical team consisting of doctors and nurses was dispatched immediately, who ensured the provision of the best medical aid to Pakistanis trapped in the disaster-affected areas. The Turkish government announced an aid of $150 million – $100 million in financial assistance and $50 million in relief items. Turkish rescue teams built a temporary tent city and provided shelter to thousands of the earthquake victims.

Our close friend, Turkiye, which enjoys great respect in the eyes of Pakistanis is facing a similar tragic situation. Last week’s massive twin earthquakes in Turkiye and Syria have led to the deaths of around 41,000 people. As many as ten Turkish cities have been badly affected, and multiple buildings have been destroyed. According to media reports, it is estimated that as much as 70 per cent of the buildings in Antakya, the capital of Hatay province, now stand destroyed.

The earthquake hit Turkiye on February 6, and nine hours after the massive earthquake, another one hit the country, further damaging infrastructure and buildings. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the recent earthquakes are one of the worst natural disasters in history.

History tells that nothing has ever been so fearful for a person than an earthquake. The disaster occurs when the inner plate of the earth – consisting of layers of soil, stones and rocks – breaks or moves from its place due to some geological pressure and generates invisible waves on the earth’s surface. Most of the damage is due to the collapse of buildings that cannot withstand the earthquake waves and the subsequent lack of timely rescue activities.

In my view, earthquakes actually bring a message that humans, despite so much scientific progress, are powerless before God. Just an earthquake strikes and everything collapses. However, in this time of difficulty, various incredible news reports have also emerged, which strengthen our belief in God’s mercy. That a young girl was rescued after 178 hours is undoubtedly a miracle.

The real test after the earthquake is now for the international community to move forward to provide humanitarian aid and selflessly help people in need. Most recently, a Pakistani-American citizen has won the hearts of those who care about humanity. The said person reportedly provided a huge amount of aid to the Turkish Embassy while keeping his identity hidden.

The Pakistan Hindu Council has decided that special prayers will be offered for the victims of the earthquake in Turkiye and Syria on the occasion of the religious festival ‘Maha Shivratri’ on the 18th of February.

Eighteen years ago, Turkiye was in the lead for the rescue of earthquake victims in our country. Today, while showing solidarity with the Turkish people, I would like to appeal to every Pakistani that we should try our best to help the people living in Turkey and Syria in this critical time. There should be joint efforts by the international community to tackle such disasters without any discrimination.

The writer is a member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council.

He tweets @RVankwani