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Deadly Distraction - Kashmir Conflict Bleeds Two Poor Nations

Pacific News Service, Kumar Venkat, Jun 19, 2002

India, home to the largest population of poor people on the planet, and Pakistan, where nearly half of all men and most women are illiterate, have each poured billions into a military solution to a decades-long border dispute. It's time for the region's leaders to address a livable future for their citizens.

War as a means of achieving lasting peace and security is illogical enough, but the spectacle of two poor countries engaged in a continuous and destructive conflict over a disputed piece of land for more than 50 years is absurd. When they are dangerously armed with nuclear weapons and spend far beyond their means on so-called defense, it borders on madness.

The conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir has already taken a huge toll on both countries. In addition to excessive military spending and terrible loss of life, it has diverted attention from the fundamental question of how to enable the vast populations in each nation to achieve dignified living standards.

Pakistan -- where 42 percent of men and 72 percent of women are illiterate -- spends twice as much on defense as it does on education. India -- which has a population of over 1 billion, and where almost half the children under age 4 suffer from malnutrition -- spends three times as much for military purposes as for health and family planning. Defense consumes nearly 20 percent of the combined national budgets of the two countries, each driven in large part by the need to defend itself against the other.

The subcontinent is home to the largest concentration of poor people on earth, their lives now even less secure due to the nuclear arsenals in the region.

While India has made some impressive advances in recent years by adopting a more open economy and becoming a major player in information technology, Pakistan's economy has stagnated and its per capita income has actually declined over the last few years. But fears of war and terrorism in the region could set back some of India's progress. The Times of India recently reported that the Indian economy was being "nuked" by talk of a nuclear war.

Moreover, about 72 percent of Indians live in rural areas, and many of them depend directly or indirectly

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on agriculture for their livelihoods. Although India is warmly embracing high-tech, access to computers and the Internet will not necessarily address the root causes of high rural poverty rates.

Instead, each nation must: stabilize its population, provide basic education and health care for all, raise the output of farmlands in ways that don't ruin the land and reverse the coming water scarcity so that it doesn't turn into a catastrophic food shortage.

Poverty in the subcontinent cannot be eradicated without realizing that natural resources are increasingly scarce and that there is an abundance of human resources. Technological solutions must help preserve natural resources and maximize their productivity while keeping as many people gainfully employed as possible. Appropriate, small-scale renewable energy systems and decentralized wastewater processing systems are already available. Rainwater harvesting and farming practices that prevent soil erosion and water pollution already exist.

Neither India nor Pakistan can ultimately create better lives for their people without shifting national focus to these primary issues. The Kashmir problem, with all its emotional baggage, has been used for too long by politicians to distract attention from more pressing issues. Kashmir needs to be settled once and for all through a peaceful compromise, so that sufficient investment, resources and attention can be directed toward the real problems of the long-suffering people of both nations.

PNS contributor Kumar Venkat (kumarvenkat@hotmail.com) is a Silicon Valley-based writer who reports on the digital divide, technology and global poverty.

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