



# Lessons Of a Disaster

Words fail one in times like these. The killer quake that devastated South Asia especially Pakistan on Saturday morning is a tragedy of immeasurable proportions. Any attempt to put

Western Frontier Province, have been badly hit, too. The damage and devastation is on a mind-numbing scale. Not surprising considering the fact that the quake is being estimated to be the most powerful one in the past hundred years. Even the infamous Quetta tremor of 1935 that claimed over 60,000 lives and has been known as the worst quake to hit the subcontinent, may pale before the Saturday catastrophe.

While this is no time to raise inconvenient and politically incorrect questions but one can't help wonder why there had been no warnings about the disaster despite the fact that most countries around the world including Pakistan today have geological centres regularly monitoring seismic activity. How come we never got any warnings about this disaster of unfathomable scale? Of course, this is not to argue that such warnings could have helped the people in the region avoid the calamity. But, without doubt timely advice of caution could have helped the countries in the disaster's path brace for it and limit the monumental loss of life.

In the wake of Asian tsunami tragedy, whose disastrous effects multiplied thanks to a lack of warning, there was much talk underscoring the importance of having an early warning system in place across Asia. Whatever happened to all those measures proposed to deal with such disasters? Apparently, we are still talking about them!

There are invaluable lessons to be drawn from this tragedy. While reaching out to the quake victims in Pakistan and elsewhere with all possible help, we must not lose sight of the fundamental lessons of the disaster. That to be warned is to be prepared.

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the widespread loss of life and property in comprehensible terms at this stage would be futile. There are over 30,000 confirmed deaths and the toll is constantly rising. Thousands could be lying under the thousands of tonnes of debris in devastated cities and towns. Since the epicentre of the quake—recorded 7.6 on the Richter scale—was near Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, the scenic region has taken the direct hit of the temblor.

According to the Pak authorities, nearly half of the Pakistani Kashmir has been completely wrecked. The Indian-administered Kashmir hasn't escaped the catastrophic effects of the tragedy, either. Over six hundred people have died in the Valley on the Indian side. Unlike politics, it would appear, nature is a great leveler. Pakistan's capital, Islamabad—so close to Kashmir—and the North

A Pakistan Kashmiri father holds his injured daughter at a Turkish medical camp in the quake-hit area of Muzaffarabad, Oct. 11. (AFP Photo)

## Merkel Clinches It, But the Price Is High

Late last week, Germans were still bracing for a long-drawn-out game of political poker. Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's fate would be the central question in tortuous talks to form a "grand coalition" after the Christian Democrats (CDU) won an additional seat at by-elections in Dresden on October 2nd. The chancellor's Social Democrats (SPD) intended to use him to extract as much as possible in terms of policy and positions from the other side, while the CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), didn't even want to start real negotiations until Mr Schroeder was pushed aside and the SPD accepted Angela Merkel, the opposition leader, as the new chancellor.

Dresden vote, which had been postponed because of a candidate's death. Mr Schroeder was thus forced to come off his high horse. He and other SPD



Angela Merkel

Yet over the weekend, things moved more quickly than many had predicted, and on Monday October 10th the CDU/CSU and the SPD reached a power-sharing deal that will end Mr Schroeder's seven years in office. Ms Merkel will become not just Germany's first woman chancellor, but its first chancellor from eastern Germany—crowning a breathtaking political career that began only 15 years ago, after Germany's unification. This deal puts an end to a three-week deadlock that was the result of an inconclusive election on September 18th, when the governing SPD/Green coalition lost its majority and the opposition failed to win one of its own. After both the CDU/CSU and the SPD had failed to build coalitions with the Greens and the Free Democrats (FDP), a grand coalition became the most likely outcome.

The agreement also concludes one of the stranger episodes in Germany's post-war politics: that of a chancellor having just lost an election, but claiming that he was the only one capable of forming a stable government. Mr Schroeder must have known that it was going to be difficult to hold on to his chancellorship, even after the SPD had done much better than expected in the poll, for although Ms Merkel failed to win a majority for her reform agenda, the CDU and the CSU managed to form the biggest parliamentary group. Mr Schroeder's hand was further weakened when the CDU won one more seat in the

heavyweights started signaling that he would be willing to step aside for the right price. In terms of positions, at least, Mr Schroeder was successful. In return for allowing Ms Merkel to become chancellor, the SPD is expected to get more policy portfolios than the CDU, including weighty ones such as foreign affairs, finance and the ministry in charge of labour-market reform. The CDU will get the defence and interior portfolios. What kind of chancellor will Ms Merkel be? One thing is already certain: she will be no German Margaret Thatcher. Yet it would be a mistake to underestimate Ms Merkel. "If Schroeder was a sprinter, Merkel is a long-distance runner," says Wolfgang Nowak, head of the Alfred Herrhausen Society, a think-tank run by Deutsche Bank. She is considered extremely methodical, going through all the options before making a decision. Insiders call her a "learning machine." And she has certainly learned a lot since Helmut Kohl picked her out of obscurity in 1991, not least from Mr Schroeder's often frustrated efforts to reform the economy.

Ms Merkel will need all her political skills to make a grand coalition work. ECONOMIST.COM

Like a cat that tortures a lizard it found in the yard, first plucking its tail, then tearing off a leg before finally boring with it, seems to be U.S. President George W. Bush's attitude toward Syrian President Bashar Assad. Since the beginning of the war against Iraq, Assad has become Bush's toy—until he succeeded in building him up to an enemy on the scale of Saddam Hussein, or at least the president of Iran.

This inflation of the Syrian doll has been so successful that today, without a doubt, if there is someone to blame for the failure of the war against terror in Iraq, it is Assad. If there is someone who threatens the peace of the region, it is Assad. And if

## A Toy Called Assad

there is a leader whose deposit would make all of the U.S.'s problems in the region vanish—lo and behold—it is Assad. Thus, a head of state who is considered a weakling in the eyes of several important Arab leaders and whose deposit the administration in Washington allows itself to publicly contemplate has managed to become such a global threat that he is the subject of complete paragraphs in all of Bush's declarations.

For example, when the president of Turkey visited Washington in June, Bush scolded him for his warm relations with Syria. A substantial part of the conversations Bush conducts with

Putin revolve around "the problems Assad is causing in Iraq." And Washington has forged close ties with its rival, France, on the Lebanon issue, for one, because France agreed to cold shoulder Assad. American officials have been leaking information for several weeks about "examining the role of President Assad." And now Washington is building high expectations about the international commission of inquiry chaired by German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis on the murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Assad brought President Hosni Mubarak the transcripts of the investigations

conducted by Mehlis in Syria, which according to Assad, clearly indicate his regime was not involved in the murder of Hariri. But even if Assad emerges from this inquiry as pure as snow, he will still be guilty. The building of the American file against Assad is so blatant that there are already those who are sketching scenarios of peace with Syria in the post-Assad era, or at least looking into who would replace him. But don't hold your breath. Assad is a weak leader and it can't be said he possesses any great political insight, but he is an Arab leader and therefore Hossni Mubarak and the Saudi King Abdullah were

quick to publicly declare two weeks ago that they would not lend a hand to isolating Syria. Neither would Iran and Russia.

But that is not the important thing. Because Syria is not just Assad. Today there are many who wish to see him fall from power, and not all of them would replace him with a leader "desirable" to the West.

In a situation of internal struggle over a regime in which too many parties are armed, the Iraqization of Syria is not an imaginary scenario. The Afghan and Iraqi models should already have made it clear what happens when a regime is "revived" from the outside. But how it is possible to give up such an easy plighting? HAARETZ.COM

As the London Economist wrote, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's "Revolution" was a "very Japanese" one indeed. What European politician today could dream of calling a general election designed to punish Parliament for having rejected his legislation and being rewarded with an electoral victory? None.

For leading French and German politicians, it's the toughest of times. A tough fighter, Social Democrat Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder tried to follow Koizumi's path. He called new elections hoping they would permit him to continue his controversial social reforms. Thanks to his excellent campaign and to the poor appeal of Christian Democrat challenger Angela Merkel, Schroeder gained far more votes than expected, win-

## No "Koizumi Power" in Europe

ning only three seats less than his rival. Nonetheless, the election was still a setback.

Schroeder's poor performance owed less to the progress of the right than to the growing strength of a new extreme left party that unites Socialists who disagree with Schroeder's reforms and disgruntled residents of eastern Germany, where unemployment hovers at 18 percent and standards of living lag far behind those in western Germany.

"A nation divided against itself will perish," says the Bible. The same quote is often heard in the two major French political parties, the Gaullist UMP ("union for a popular majority") and the Socialist Party, whose activities are dominated by the prospect

of the spring 2007 presidential election.

All French parties have in mind the outcome of the first round of the 2002 election. At that time President Jacques Chirac got only 18 percent of the ballots, and the second-place finisher was not Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, as expected, but extreme-rightist Jean-Marie Le Pen, which meant that there was no leftist candidate in the second round. Chirac was elected two weeks later after winning an unprecedented 82 percent of the vote, a victory that reflected the strong democratic convictions of the French people.

Could a similar result occur again? Both the right and the left are at least as divided as they were in 2002, largely due to the

victory of the "No" vote in the May referendum on the draft European constitution.

Chirac, who had had thrown his weight behind the "Yes" camp, suffered a great setback. Now 73, he has been president for 10 years.

Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who is more popular than Chirac, is the president's right-hand man. Which means that if Chirac decided not to run, de Villepin could, in spite of his repeated denials, enter the race. It's too early to say, but it's not unlikely that there will be two UMP candidates—de Villepin and Nicolas Sarkozy. There is no guarantee that either of them would win, given the revival of nationalist sentiments, which will throw

votes the way of Le Pen—or his daughter.

The economy will play an important role in the election. Nobody dares bet that GDP will actually hit the 2.25 percent growth rate on which Finance Minister Thierry Breton bases his budget. As in Germany, France's unemployment remains far too high at just under 10 percent (and even higher among younger people). As Le Monde comments, difficulties are piling up for the government.

These developments ought to fuel the political left's performance. But the socialists are enduring a civil war of sorts among the five or six people who are jockeying for the party's leadership and a berth in the upcoming presidential election. France may pay a high price for their premature electoral campaign. JAPANTIMES.CO.JP

Teaching English to foreign students of business studies in London many years ago, I was torn between disbelief and high amusement when I received the assignment of one of my Nigerian students. The class had been asked to write a formal job application.

"Please, Honoured Sir!" wrote the student. "If you will only give me the chance, I promise that you will find me obedient, humble and loyal. I will do your every bidding. Just let me prove myself, I am begging you. May God

bless you and your entire family. Yours obediently..."

Hmm. Difficult to know how to grade this one. A+ for obsessiveness, perhaps? Top of the class for slavishness? How to apologise to the poor lad for the mentality instilled by the British Empire and still going strong? How to explain that boot-licking was no longer the order of the day, and that qualifications, references and experience spoke for themselves?

So sure was I that the mindset expressed in this student's work was

## Pleasing the Boss

the unfortunate, sick remnant of empire lingering on way past its Sell By date.

In the midst of my condescending, First World chortling over such outmoded attitudes and silly language, my amusement was halted abruptly in its tracks upon reading the advice in various up-to-the-minute business magazines, aimed at modern young men and women, eager to mount the Western-style corporate ladder.

"Making your boss look good should be your 'job 1', to borrow a

phrase from Ford." Oh yeah! But tell us more.

"Anticipating what will make your boss look good can go a long way toward advancing your career." (Translation: being diligent and competent in your work is not enough! Feign helpful, supportive friendliness to butter up the boss in order to claw your way to the top.) "If you happen to know that your boss's boss likes pie charts, prepare them for your boss. You might say something

like, 'I know your superior likes pie charts, so I thought that these might make your presentation a little smoother.'"

But wait! Amidst all the pie chart preparation, a disturbing little article appeared in last week's news: "Survey finds 2.5 million Britons suffer work related stress caused by long hours and pressure to reach targets." Gosh. That's an awful lot of the British workforce.

"One in four workers complained that pres-

sure had reached harmful levels, often causing ulcers, heart attacks or strokes, according to the survey."

"Half of those surveyed complained that their workload was too heavy. Two out of five said their boss was unreasonable, often expecting them to work when they were ill, and a third were set 'unrealistic' targets."

Is it not ironic that all the labour-saving technology that has developed and improved and proliferated over the centuries since the time of the Industrial

Revolution has brought us to this pretty pass! Not increased leisure-time, freedom from exploitation and slavish attachment to the workplace, but, on the contrary, workers who, when not galloping along breathlessly throughout the day to meet the dreaded targets set, are prepared to lie down and have the boss wipe his feet all over them.

All sounds quite reasonable and appropriate now, I must say.

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