

Assisting Earthquake Survivors Through Transitional Shelter

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In the cool morning hours of October 8, 2005, a massive earthquake shook northern Pakistan and neighboring areas in India and Afghanistan. As the quake violently rattled the earth, unstable walls crumbled, and heavy concrete roofs fell flat to the ground, crushing people and animals instantly. For many of those who survived the earthquake, the weeks and months ahead brought multiple, life-altering challenges.

Among the foremost obstacles for the 5 million people whose homes were destroyed or severely damaged was securing adequate shelter before the onset of the rapidly approaching Himalayan winter. On the ground in Pakistan less than 48 hours after the earthquake, a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) worked tirelessly to support the Government of Pakistan (GOP) in providing shelter to the newly homeless and displaced populations. Given the harsh nature of northern Pakistan's winter, as well as the lack of winterized tents available on the worldwide market, OFDA promoted a strategy to address the need for shelter by emphasizing a range of non-tent transitional shelter options, focused on helping individuals to create shelter in and near their affected homes, known as "shelter in place."

Recognizing both the short- and long-term shelter needs of earthquake survivors, OFDA provided transitional shelter materials to allow affected Pakistanis to create shelter in place rather than relocating to temporary camps. OFDA provided materials and technical assistance in order to assist individuals to build transitional shelter structures, particularly one warm, dry room—or a small room that not only provides emergency shelter in the short-term but also can be used as part of a permanent structure. With the DART's technical and logistical assistance, OFDA provided sufficient and appropriate transitional shelter materials and instruction in a timely manner to those in need, which affected all other aspects of the humanitarian response.



A Pakistani man carries OFDA plastic sheeting and a water container received during a distribution in Purri, outside of Balakot, Pakistan (CRS).

In the aftermath of any large-scale natural disaster, the mass movement of displaced people to temporary camps compounds existing problems by creating a high demand for humanitarian goods and services, including water and sanitation facilities, health care, food, and other items. Following the earthquake, aid agencies estimated that up to 60 percent of the people who lost their homes would seek shelter assistance in temporary camps. In order to effectively assist affected Pakistanis and simultaneously jump-start the rebuilding process, OFDA-funded programs were designed to ensure that the majority of homeless Pakistanis remained on their land or close to home, rather than relocating to camps.

In response to the damage caused by the earthquake, OFDA distributed shelter materials including plastic sheeting and corrugated iron roofing materials to be used both for reinforcing temporary shelters and building permanent shelters. OFDA not only provided materials for transitional shelters but also worked closely with the GOP on issues related to both shelters and settlements. Two OFDA shelter and settlements advisors regularly traveled to Pakistan from October 2005 through June 2006, the longest deployment of such experts in a single disaster in the history of OFDA. The shelter and settlements advisors collaborated with the Federal Relief Commission and Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority, two agencies established by the GOP to plan, coordinate, and monitor reconstruction and rehabilitation activities in areas affected by the earthquake. The advisors provided technical expertise to these agencies on crucial shelter and settlement issues, including rubble removal, provision of adequate safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, use of unstable land, and seismic hazard mitigation.



Local community members in Pakistan receive training in carpentry, masonry, and other trades (Kaukab Jhumra Smith, USAID).

By emphasizing transitional shelter as a means to enable Pakistanis to remain close to home, OFDA programs benefited affected individuals in a number of ways. Due in part to assistance from the USG and other donors, most newly homeless Pakistanis sought shelter in place following the earthquake rather than migrating to camps. As a result, only 20 percent of earthquake-affected families left their settlements for camps, thereby dramatically reducing costly relocations both to and from temporary camps for the majority of affected individuals. With materials from OFDA, a significant number of Pakistanis built durable transitional shelters to last through a potentially lengthy rebuilding process. Staying in place protected traditional family units, including women who follow cultural norms of staying within the family's home or property limits.

OFDA provided transitional shelters for 590,000 people and transitional shelter materials and assistance for an additional 300,000 people, supporting nearly one-fifth of the Pakistanis whose homes had been damaged or destroyed in the October 8 earthquake. This assistance incorporated seismic-resistant construction measures and training programs for masons and carpenters, ensuring that individuals in northern Pakistan will be less vulnerable in the next major earthquake. By emphasizing transitional shelter and providing appropriate shelter materials, OFDA improved immediate living conditions and paved the way for a more timely recovery phase for people affected by the South Asia earthquake.