

Chinook Diplomacy

By Rod A. Beckstrom

As soon as I left the airport in Islamabad, I heard the loud thump, thump, thump of two huge Chinook helicopters overhead. My driver turned around with a huge smile on his face and said, "Look, they are great -- these from America."

No sooner had I checked into my hotel room overlooking the foothills of Kashmir, did I hear the loud thumping of another pair of Chinooks heading into the mountains -- ferrying desperately needed relief supplies into the quake zone.

These Chinooks provide the most audible and visceral experience of the relief operations that continue today. In fact, they are an aerial highway into Kashmir, where 200,000 people can't be reached by roads.

I have traveled through 15 Middle Eastern countries since Sept. 11 working to improve Western/Muslim relations. But nothing I have seen thus far compares with the raw power of this Chinook Diplomacy.

Why is this diplomacy so powerful? It directly hits your senses. First you hear the thumping rotors from miles away. Then you look up to see them. As the choppers approach, the vibration is so great you can feel it in your gut. Loose windows and metal panels rattle. When they land you can smell and almost taste the massive clouds of dust. This is what a relief effort looks, sounds and smells like.

There are 1,200 U.S. servicemen in Pakistan helping to support the relief efforts. Many are on the Chinook crews. Others operate a medical MASH unit that helps the wounded. Our country couldn't hope for better ambassadors.

These men and women and their Chinooks are winning the hearts and minds of tens of millions of Pakistanis and Kashmiris. Lots of the people here have long held anti-American sentiments, but when they see these great and loud beasts bringing loads of urgent medical supplies, tents, doctors and rations, there is no way to dispute the power of the message: Americans care and we are here to help.

Even while President Musharraf spoke at the International Donor's conference in Islamabad in November, his speech was almost overpowered by the deep thumping sound of two Chinooks passing overhead. The president paused briefly, raised his voice, and continued. But the symbolism was just too strong for the audience to ignore.

The most striking image for me took place one night as we were driving the long and dangerous road back down from the mountains in Kashmir to Islamabad and got stuck in a traffic jam. All of a sudden the great noise of the vibrating rotors could be heard coming up over the shoulder of the mountain.

A small boy who was standing beside my car window pointed up in the air, smiling from ear to ear, glowing, shouting in Urdu to his father while jumping up and down. His father, with a long beard and traditional Kashmiri dress and white Muslim cap, looked up and smiled. Everyone stopped and witnessed the power of two huge Chinooks flying low overhead across the mountain shoulder.

What greater diplomacy is there than to show and serve humanity with the power of our best in a time of need? In a span of just weeks, Americans have gone from being doubted in Kashmir to being greatly appreciated.

After Sept. 11 Americans asked, "Why do they hate us?"

On this trip, I learned the answer -- "because they do not know us" and "because we have not yet served them."

Chinook Diplomacy shows us and them a better way forward, one thump at a time. May we heed the message -- nothing trumps service to humanity -- with a loud thump, thump, thump.

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