

Expertise on the Move: British Aid to Pakistan and the Emergence of Disaster Relief
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During the night of 12-13 November 1970, a devastating cyclone hit the Bay of Bengal. With winds of 140 mph and a storm surge of twenty feet, the cyclone became the worst tropical cyclone disaster in the twentieth century. East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) received the main thrust of the storm. The cyclone moved northeast into the mouth of the River Maghas and swamped the coastal areas of Patuakhali in the Barisal district and Bhola, Hatia and many other islands in the Noakhali district. After the storm had passed, the real disaster began. One quarter of East Pakistan's landmass was under water for a time after the cyclone hit. The total death toll reached between 300,000 and 500,000 people. The cyclone wiped out all infrastructure and communications. Survivors needed urgent care and lacked almost all necessities of life. They had no water, food, or shelter. Unburied corpses and carcasses piled up and posed a serious health threat. The problem was not only the lack of supplies but also the difficulty in reaching the disaster-stricken areas. Aircraft began to arrive en masse from overseas carrying supplies. The result was a logjam of uncoordinated relief supplies at Dacca airport. The natural catastrophe fueled an already ongoing political crisis in the region.

This paper examines the British response to the 1970 East Pakistan cyclone and show that disaster relief in Pakistan emerged as "soft diplomacy" in response to growing political tensions in the region. Historians studying the international relief to East Pakistan have focused mainly on the crucial months after the election and the subsequent war of liberation but little attention has been paid to the disaster relief of the region. The cyclone and the relief effort in its aftermath, I show, played an important role in precipitating the political conflict which would lead to the creation of Bangladesh as well as in laying the foundations for an international mechanism of disaster relief. The relief efforts created a precedent for the official use of the military in cases of natural disasters. British relief also laid the foundation for a "soft" diplomacy through the use of disaster relief, seen as a new method in foreign policy for stabilizing a region. British official relief was particularly important for carrying out such tasks. Its commitment to Pakistan as a Commonwealth member shaped its incentive to pour in supplies. The British government committed to immediate £530,000 aid for the provision of relief supplies and an additional long-term assistance in the form of food under the Food Aid Convention to the value of £500,000. This was added to a non-governmental contribution of British charities, which was estimated to amount to £800,000. While the cyclone relief was a short episode within the political turmoil preceding 1971, the military involvement of British troops in the disaster relief during the three weeks in November 1970 created a crucial precedent of the soft diplomacy through disaster relief. Importantly, it was made possible because of the shrinking of the British military and the Far East Command after decolonization.