

## MIND NUMBING EXPERIENCES OF BEING WITH THE CYCLONE VICTIMS

I have just returned from a four-day visit of the affected areas of the cyclone Sidr and witnessed with my own eyes the widespread devastation it has caused. It was a mind numbing experience, especially to be with the family members who lost their own near and dear ones.

I have personally been to four districts – Borguna, Patuakhali, Pirojpur and Jalkhathi. My colleagues, Ranju, Bulbul and Badsha and the Youth Ending Hunger (YEH) volunteer Rana were with me. So were a group of Shujan volunteers, The Hunger Project volunteer-animators and the *Bikoshito Nari* leaders, with whom we work on a regular basis. Mr. Mustafizur Rahman of Spandan-B was with us the first day.

On 21 November, we went to two remote locations of Borguna district. We took a trawler from Amtali Ghat on the bank of Paira river and went to Choto Lobon Khola of Burir Chor Union, and Chali Tetuli Bazar and adjoining villages of Mansha Baliatoli Union, both under Sadar Upazila of Borguna district. We distributed relief supplies of rice, saris, lungis, oral saline and water purification tablets to about 1600 families. The Chairman of Mansha Baliatoli UP, Md. Shahjahan and some UP members and local conscientious citizens, including Tipu assisted us in this effort. Principal Razia Begum, President of Borguna Shujan, Mr. Manash Datta, Secretary of Shujan Patuakhali Upzila, Honsne Ara Hashi of Jago Nari, Aroti Roy, Sheila, Nargis, Tania, Nasrin, all of whom are *Bikoshito Nari* leaders were with us during the relief distribution. We also contributed some sackful of rice to the gruel organised by Hosne Ara Hashi.

Next day, November 22<sup>nd</sup>, we went to Mativhanga village and Vhutu Mia Hatkhola of South Choto Bhigahi Union, and Abashan of Boro and Choto Bighai Unions, both under Sadar Patuakhali Upazila. Again we had to take a trawler to reach these places, which were badly hit by the cyclone. Chairman in-charge Mr. Alhaj Abdur Razzaq Howlader and Abdus Salam Howlader and Nur Banu, both UP Members and other local leaders helped us distribute the relief goods. Major General (Rtd.) ASM Motiur Rahman, the Advisor for Health of the Caretaker Government dropped in with a group of government officials while we were distributing relief supplies at Vitu Mia Hatkhola. Abdul Khaleq, Secretary, Shujan of Patuakhali district, Advocate Nizamuddin Ahmed, President and Mr. Manash Datta, Secretary of Patuakhali Sadar Upazila Shujan, Abdul Haque and Syed Mufazzal Hossain, Members of Patuakhali Shujan and Debashish Datta of YEH volunteer were with me.

In the evening, my colleagues distributed saris, lungis and rice to over 200 families at Lau Khati Abashan under Patuakhali Sadar Upazial. We provided support to nearly 1500 families on the second day.

On November 23<sup>rd</sup>, my colleagues and I went to Kathalia and Amua Unions of Kathalia Upazila under Jalkathi district, where we distributed about 1000 packages. There we met the UNO, Dr. Golam Farouk and other officials. In the afternoon, my colleagues distributed relief materials to about 500 families at Shialkathi and Ghawa Unions under Bhandharia Upazia of Pirojpur district. We were assisted by Chairman Amirul Islam, Ilyas Sikder Farhad, Shah Alam Khalifa, Afroz Shanu, Nilufar Yasmin and a large number of volunteer-animators, Shujan volunteers and YEH volunteers.

Many families, especially living in chars and on the bank of the rivers adjacent to coastal areas were marooned and lost one or more of their family members. There were also deaths from collapsed trees and houses. Official death toll is now approaching 5,000, but the actual number may be many times more – there is no way to ascertain the actual number without an extensive survey.

Those who survived lost almost everything. All their material assets were either washed away by the gushing water flow or blown away by the strong wind. Houses were demolished, plants flattened, and trees uprooted. I have seen villages with not a single dwelling unit standing. Many families are now spending their nights under open sky without any shelter. The corrugated sheets of their roofs were either blown away or were demolished to a point of becoming useless.

Rice paddies, which would have been ready for harvesting in a few days, were flattened and completely destroyed. The stock of rice and other food items of many families were also washed away. Even the middle and lower middle class families are in dire needs of food and other essentials.

Many victims have lost their tools of trade. Cattle and buffalos of the coastal areas were washed away. So were the seeds. Many fishermen lost their trawlers as well as nets.

Drinking water is the most scarce item in the coastal areas. Hand pumps, to begin with, were very few in numbers and many pumps have become dysfunctional. The pond water have become too contaminated and unusable. In fact, the contaminated water also killed the fish in the ponds.

To conclude, our efforts, supported largely by the generosity of Spandan-B, were miniscule compared to the enormous needs of the cyclone victims. Food, water and clothing, especially winter clothes continue to be the highest priority items. However, we need to start giving immediate attention to rehabilitation. More hand pumps need to be sunk in the coastal areas without delays. Farmers soon will need seeds and bullocks, and the fishermen nets and boats. Their dwellings also need to be constructed. An overlooked item is the books for primary and secondary students.

Another priority should be to repair the embankments and make them stronger and more elevated. The earth work for embankments can generate income for the poorest of the poor. We must also create a blanket of greeneries along the coast. However, we should be careful as to the types of trees that are planted. One of the reasons for widespread destruction of trees in the cyclone affected areas was that many of those were wrong types of trees.

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