



VISIT TO BANGLADESH – DECEMBER 2007

INTRODUCTION

The disastrous cyclone Sidr that struck South Bangladesh on Thurs 15 Nov resulted in thousands dead and millions homeless. Immediately, the Muslim Welfare Institute (MWI) & the Ummah Welfare Trust (UWT) launched a joint emergency appeal and relief work started on the ground. Few weeks on, the MWI decided to send a delegation to Bangladesh to assess the situation on the ground & also participate in the Qurbaani Programme.

In this edition of UNITY, Moulana Yusuf Patel of the UWT presents an emotional eye-witness account of the visit.

Eid-ul-Adha & Qurbaani in Dhaka

On Thurs 19 Dec. a delegation comprising of Moulana Shafiq of the MWI, Moulana Elyas Desai of Preston & myself left for Bangladesh. We arrived in Dhaka the following morning, which was also the day of Eid. We started by visiting Begumpur village, 30 kms from Dhaka where MWI has constructed an orphanage by the name of Friends of Zayd (R.A.). 20 orphans reside at the complex and are taught Arabic, Bengali, English and other basic religious and vocational skills.



Orphans welcome us at Friends of Zayd (R.A) Orphanage.



Qurbaani Distribution – Begumpur

In neighboring villages, we distributed Qurbaani meat to those unfortunate people who rarely have the opportunity of consuming meat. Field workers on the ground had, prior to the distribution, assessed the needs of the locals and gave each family a voucher accordingly. This ensured fairness and effective distribution. In total, the UWT-MWI joint Qurbaani project in Bangladesh totaled to 4350 Qurbaanis at a budget of £97,500. This also included 119 Qurbaanis on behalf of Human Appeal International (HAI). From Begumpur, we had to travel on bicycle rickshaws for approximately 5 kms as the bridge leading to the area had collapsed due to the summer floods of 2007.

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Destruction beyond imagination

The following day, we departed for South Bangladesh, the cyclone affected region, which was the main purpose of our journey. After a tiresome journey of 5 hours, we arrived at the famous city of Khulna and rested for the night. As we continued our journey further south, we started to observe the effects and remains of the tidal wave. The further we travelled, the worse it got. For miles and miles, the only remains we saw were uprooted or bent trees, shattered homes, and roofless mosques. The destruction we were witnessing was beyond imagination.

Interestingly, we noted that the religiosity of the village citizens also increased as we travelled. With simplicity clearly visible, more women wore the complete Hijab, and modesty was second to none.

Tears to our eyes

The first village we visited to distribute aid was Hajipara, in Bagerhat district. The village is 50 kms from the ocean. We distributed food packs and blankets and lay the foundation for a water filter. It was here we heard the story of Fatima that brought tears to our eyes. She was walking with her child when the tidal wave forced them to a tree and the child's hands stuck to a tree. She started to scream, "Cut my hand and let me free" but to Fatima's despair the wave swept the child away with the tree until Fatima could no longer hear the cries. Everyone had a story to tell but we had to move on.

Our next visit was to Rajessor village where we distributed Qurbaani to over 500 people and inaugurated a water filter system. We also laid the foundation for a mosque that had virtually been swept away. A meeting was also arranged with the local scholars to discuss the needs and priorities of the local people. Close by, we visited neighboring village of Tafalbari where food aid and Qurbaani meat was distributed.

The following day, we visited Rajapur in Jalakhathi district. After distributing food packs, we met with a number of ministers and local officials. The Chief Relief Coordinator and Under Secretary of Honour to the Bangladeshi Government, Mahmood Hasan was also present and we discussed the long-term initiatives government agencies and NGOs propose to rebuild the economy.



Trees uprooted by the forces of nature

Abdul Mannan & Saliha lose everything

On the same day, we were scheduled to visit Mirzaganj village in Gorkhali district. We travel hundreds of kilometers through the jungles and rivers with a bumpy ride as the roads are severely damaged. The village was 5 kms away from the ocean and words simply cannot describe the catastrophe. The Mosque had vanished, and all but one home had swept away.

We distributed relief and listened to the personal accounts of the residents. It was here, we met 60 years old Abdul Mannan and his wife Saliha. Both were unaware of the cyclone until the tidal wave reached their home. There was virtually no chance of them surviving but the Almighty had decided otherwise. The water forced them up and they clung to a tree from 9pm for a few hours until the water started to retreat back. Their livelihood, fishery items, and 25,000 Takas (£200) worth of vegetation had been destroyed.

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35 burials in one day

In the same village, we came across a mini graveyard where 35 martyred corpses had been buried in one day. This was one of the saddest moments of our visit and reminded us of our ultimate destiny.

The journey and narratives got worse the next day. We travelled 5 km in a speedboat across river Bishkal from Boroytala, to reach the isolated village of South Tetul Baria. The area was in a total mess and the village had been ransacked. Four of the five mosques have been destroyed and all the water ponds had been infected. More than 300 homes were destroyed and up to 30 people were martyred. Until our arrival, no aid had yet reached the village, nor were they pre-warned about the cyclone.

Helinah Begum loses her child

It was here we heard heart-rattling accounts. Helinah Begum described the moment when the tidal wave forced the roof of her shed-house unto her eight year old child who died in front of her eyes. Subsequently, her forehead was injured and she showed us the injury sustained by her hand when trying to uphold the roof. She tried her utmost best to protect and save her child but was unable to do so.

Everyone had a story to tell. Some would describe the number of people dead in their family or the velocity and ferocity of the wave. Others showed us the location of the mass graves whilst some cried in tears for being unable to locate corpses. There were those who tried to take refuge in boats and ships but were thrown overboard and drowned. The village was in total ruins.

There remained broken homes, infected lakes, uprooted trees, mass graves, razed mosques, wrecked boats, traumatized people and broken hearts. The village was silent in horror as people continued to remember the tragedy. Following on from South Tetul Baria, we visited the tip of the country Kua Kata and returned to Dhaka after spending four days in the region.

Widows Complex

After our return to Dhaka, we visited a unique complex by the name of 'Hazrat Ayesha (R.A.) Widows Complex' a MWI project in Dayamir Village on the outskirts of Sylhet. The complex comprises of 50 houses for widows & their families surrounded by ponds, farms & vegetation for income generation programmes. The cost of the project was £85,000 donated by the Muslims of Preston in 2005. We also participated in a 'Group Weddings Programme' and observed sewing machine classes in Kishoreganj district.



Relief distribution – Rajapur

Conclusion

The crux of the journey is clear. The cyclone was no ordinary tragedy, nor was it the 'normal floods' as many have assumed. We only understood the extent of the catastrophe after visiting the region and our observations were 6 weeks following the cyclone. We had heard in media reports that the water gushed inland 200 kms at speeds exceeding 250 kms per hour but failed to understand and comprehend the reality of this. The greatest challenge for both the MWI and UWT is to initiate long-term reconstruction, sanitation, forestation, and income generating projects to rebuild the economy and alleviate the suffering of the people. May the Almighty accept our humble efforts, Ameen.

(Article presented by Moulana Yusuf Patel of the UWT, the MWI would like to thank Moulana for this eye-witness account prepared in a very short time)

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Bangladesh Cyclone Relief - The Story so Far...

As soon as information of the cyclone spread, the MWI & UWT launched a joint appeal. The response from brothers & sisters was overwhelming. Within a short period of time, an amount of £300,000 (Three Hundred Thousand Pounds) was received. This amount included the donations raised by most of the Mosques of Blackburn & Preston, 2 Mosques of Bolton and 1 each from Chorley, Stoke & Leicester.

Our partner organization in Bangladesh, the Islahul Muslimeen Parishad (IMPB) who are based in Dhaka sent a team of workers to Khulna District in South Bangladesh from where the relief work was supervised. As the task of the relief work was huge, we decided to split the projects into 2 phases.

Following is a breakdown of the amounts allocated as part of phase 1:

- ◆ £75,000 - Distribution of Food Packs to 15,000 families at £5 per pack
- ◆ £55,000 - Repairing of 110 houses at £500 each
- ◆ £10,000 - Distribution of 50 boats at £200 each
- ◆ £ 5,000 - Distribution of 100 Small Fishing Nets at £50 each
- ◆ £ 5,000 - Installation of 10 Water Filter Systems at £500 each (Lillah Donations)



Relief Distribution - Borguna

Total for phase 1 came to £150,000 and it is very pleasing to report that majority of the projects mentioned have already been completed and paid for.

We are now moving into phase 2 where we intend to carry out the following projects which are yet to be finalized:

- ◆ £75,000 – Repairing of 150 houses at £500 each
- ◆ £25,000 – Repairing of 25 Masjids at £1000 each (Lillah Donations only)
- ◆ £20,000 – Repairing of 20 Madrasahs at £1000 each (Lillah Donations only)
- ◆ £11,200 – Distribution of 32 Large Fishing Nets at £350 each
- ◆ £10,000 – Distribution of 100 Rickshaw Vans at £100 each
- ◆ £ 6,400 – Distribution of 40 cows at £160 each
- ◆ £ 6,000 – Installation of 150 W.C. facilities at £40 each
- ◆ £ 600 – Construction of 2 shallow Tube Wells at £300 each

Total for phase 2 comes to £154,200 and we intend to have this phase finalized & completed by the end of April I.A.

Merely a drop in the ocean ...

Brothers & Sisters, it has been a wonderful response so far, but as you have read in the previous pages, substantial damage has left many hundreds of thousands homeless and a lot more work still needs to be done. The M.W.I. & UWT would like to take this opportunity to request all brothers & sisters to continue donating their Zakaah, Sadaqah & Lillah donations, which can be made according to the projects mentioned above. Donations to M.W.I. can be made by posting a cheque to the address on the first page and donations to UWT can be made by various methods, more details available on the UWT website: www.uwt.org May the Almighty through His Infinite Grace & Mercy accept all our efforts and may He protect all Muslims wherever they may reside, Ameen.