

Christians Care for Asian Quake Victims

Juggling limited resources, Christian relief groups are providing aid to people in Pakistan and India

Fighting chill and traversing through hostile terrain, Christian relief workers continued to deliver supplies in Kashmir in the weeks after a earthquake rocked southern Asia Oct. 8.

Nearly a month after the quake, thousands of homeless still huddled by hillsides in need of food, medicines and blankets. Relief workers moved quickly, hoping to build enough emergency shelters to shield survivors from the harsh winter.

Christian volunteers say in Kashmir, the hardest-hit region, which is divided between Pakistan and India, some 750,000 people, including 300,000 children, lost homes. Official estimates put the death toll at 86,000 in Pakistan and 1,350 in India.

The worst-hit frontier towns of Uri and Tanghadhar, in India-controlled Kashmir, along with several hundred adjoining villages in northern Kashmir and parts of the Poonch District of India-controlled Kashmir, were razed to rubble.

Among the many Christian groups providing shelter and blankets was Samaritan's Purse, which organized the largest airlift in its history for Islamabad, Pakistan. The organization delivered 120 tons of relief supplies, including enough rolls of plastic to shelter 24,000 families, 10,000 blankets, 350 wheelchairs, medical supplies, hospital equipment and other

items. The supplies were to be distributed in Balakot and Muzaffarabad, the two Kashmir cities closest to the epicenter of the earthquake.

Christian Aid pledged an initial \$90,000 to assist relief efforts in the quake zone. The ministry's director, Daleep Mukarji, said more money would be made available to agencies working in the area. "The scale of this disaster is so big that we must respond in some way," Mukarji said. "If the relief workers require more money, we will respond immediately."

Catholic charities, too, moved in personnel and material for relief operations, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India officials said.

Reports say the state government was caught napping when the devastation struck. Crucial initial days were wasted without launching massive relief and rescue operations. In Uri, a dozen villages remained inaccessible for more than a week. Even worse were the far-flung villages of Teetwal in Tangdhar, where at press time people were still waiting for supplies.

India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir and have been negotiating peace since 2004. But in an effort to reach out to the quake victims in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, India on Nov. 7 opened three relief centers on the Line of Control (LOC) for victims seeking supplies and medical assistance to cross over.

Food, medicines and other relief material were being sent by helicopter to the three camps. Besides disbursing relief,

workers also wanted to make these points a meeting ground for families hit by the quake but divided by the LOC.

The reconstruction of roads in Uri, necessary for normalizing the logistics, would take two to three months, according to Indian defense officials. India has also allowed Pakistani helicopters to fly close to the LOC on a case-by-case basis.

World Vision airlifted 4,000 tents and 12,000 tarpaulins from Italy and Toronto. The Salvation Army also contributed to the relief efforts by setting up a 92-tent camp with blankets and cooking supplies.

Meanwhile, Operation Blessing distributed 500 blankets to the people in the villages of India's Uri sector, and a recent Church World Service-Action by Churches Together (CWS-ACT) distribution included 1,297 shelter kits and 993 food packages in Battagram village in northeastern Pakistan.

Doctors at the state-run psychiatric hospital in Srinagar, India, said five cases of acute stress response have come in. "One among them is a 10-year-old who is showing post-trauma disorders," Dr. Abheena Hussain said.

Some Christian relief agencies faced hostile officials in India at the inter-state borders between Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir state, where they levied heavy border taxes for the relief supply trucks. "Some bluntly asked me to give [\$117] as a bribe to let the trucks pass through," said Father José of Baramullah St. Joseph's Social Service Centre.

There were also reports of officials blocking relief trucks from the Sikh religious community at the Wagah joint check

post despite clear instructions from India's Ministry of External Affairs.

Occasionally, bad weather brought relief operations to a halt, exposing quake victims to chilling cold and heavy rains. Many went without sleep during those times because they lacked tents. Cooking was virtually impossible, with no utensils or food to dig out from the debris. "Why did I remain, oh God, to suffer all this?" cried Abdul Qayoom, a 50-year-old Muslim schoolteacher in India's Uri valley.

Amid such cries and sullen faces, the only heartening sight in the Kashmir valley and the affected areas of Pakistan were the occasional beelines of relief trucks making their way to the hills. But many civil relief operations ceased where the roads ended or where people crowded en masse.

Victims living in remote mountainous areas were surprised to meet Christian workers willing to take the trouble to reach them. "For days we kept praying to God for an answer," said Qayoom, who with his villagers weren't receiving any help until several Christian groups arrived. "I'm sure He is the one who brought you to us."

Joshua Newton in Kashmir