

Sleeping with the dead

Pakistani quake survivors still in need, months after catastrophe

By CHIP DUNCAN *Posted: Mar. 11, 2006*

Muzaffarabad, Pakistan - There are thousands of tents here, amid the rubble of what was once a thriving city. As I drove along the main street two weeks ago, one of them stood out.

It was white and dirty, but most of the tents were white and dirty. It was jimmied in among rock piles, garbage and debris, but that's not uncommon here, either.

What made this tent unique was that the front flaps of this temporary shelter were just inches from a new grave.

Still, nothing about the tent suggested to passers-by that sleeping with the dead was anything out of the ordinary. That's because ordinary in Muzaffarabad changed forever at 8:40 a.m. on Saturday, Oct. 8, 2005.

Located in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier province, Muzaffarabad was the epicenter of the quake. But the devastation covered more than 30,000 square miles. It's a mountainous area roughly equal in size to the southern third of Wisconsin.

Despite the difficult terrain of the Himalayas, the Northwest Frontier province and Azad Kashmir were densely populated. Larger cities such as Balakot and Muzaffarabad were prosperous, modern communities known for their beauty, tourist amenities, schools and hospitals.

But 85 seconds changed everything.

It was a sunny, beautiful autumn morning. Most children were in school - it's a largely Muslim country, where Friday is the holy day.

Most men were working, and most women were in their homes doing chores.

In Balakot, 13-year-old Sadia and her sister, 15-year-old Rabia, were among the 450 girls sitting in the classroom of their three-story cement schoolhouse.

As the building began to rumble, Rabia remembers her teacher shouting for everyone to "run for your lives." Her teacher was among the 326 who perished, as each floor fractured and toppled onto the one below it.

Sadia and Rabia's mother, brother and friends are among the approximately 85,000 known dead. Nearly everyone who was inside a building at the time of the quake was either killed or severely injured.

Miraculously, Sadia and Rabia survived. As I spoke with them, each fought back tears as they recalled their loss. Each battles nightmares. Although each shares a sense of determination, they also have scars that will be with them forever.

The sisters are among the roughly 3 million displaced Pakistanis whose homes were damaged or destroyed in the quake and who now live in the tents provided by the United Nations or one of the international relief agencies that struggle to provide care.

It's hard to imagine 3 million people living in tents. I wasn't able to until I saw it.

It's hard to imagine schools, hospitals and entire communities laid to rubble. It's hard to imagine losing everything you own and, worse, losing your loved ones.

It's hard to imagine living through a Himalayan winter while sleeping in a tent on a carpet you dug out of the rubble that once was your house.

It's hard to imagine wearing the same clothes every day, bathing with a pot of water heated over a communal fire, scavenging demolished buildings for shoes or standing in line for hours during a freezing rain while waiting for emergency rations of flour and cooking oil.

But that's daily life in northern Pakistan.

In late February, Sir Ben Kingsley and I spent a week documenting and photographing the area for a Los Angeles-based non-profit agency called Relief International.

I wish I could say the tragic story of Sadia and Rabia is an anomaly. It's not. Virtually every person we spoke with had lost a loved one in the quake. Most had lost several.

And unlike those who suffered in the tsunami that hit the Indian Ocean on Dec. 26, 2004, or Hurricane Katrina, which ravaged the Caribbean in late August 2005, the world community remains painfully unaware of Pakistan's misery.

Those who are so often generous with their time and money simply didn't show up this time around.

Officials we met with in Pakistan, including President Pervez Musharaff and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, call it a case of "donor fatigue." While they're grateful for the work of various non-governmental organizations, the United Nations and pledges of aid and loans from several nations around the world (including the United States), the devastation and desperation far outweighs the response.

At the current pace of relief work, I believe it will take a generation before the area flourishes as it did before the quake. Right now, it's all the local people can do to simply survive the winter.

In the quest to return to some sense of normalcy, several communities have begun holding classes for those students who survived. Tents have replaced the cement block school buildings, and, weather-permitting, classes are held outside.

Like schools and other government buildings, hospitals were also hit hard during the quake. The modern five-story hospital in Muzaffarabad was destroyed almost instantly. A row of parked ambulances was crushed as the first floor was flattened. Patients, doctors and nurses had little chance of survival.

Today, doctors and nurses from several countries have set up tent hospitals in the largest communities and tent clinics in the smaller ones. Many nations responded with short-term emergency care. But the need continues.

Perhaps surprisingly, Cuba has the largest contingent of health care providers still on the scene. Prior to the earthquake, Pakistan and Cuba didn't even have diplomatic relations.

Various aid workers also expressed a need for mental health professionals. Psychological counseling is not a typical part of Pakistani life, as it is in North America and Europe. Emotional matters have been dealt with in the family system.

In this crisis, however, what constitutes a family unit has changed dramatically. In one brief stop in the village of Hilcote, we met a widower near a roadside cemetery. He'd lost eight family members. Only one small daughter survived.

As we were talking with him, another man came by with his two daughters. He'd lost seven family members.

Both men looked at us as if we could provide help or answers. All we could do was listen, and then, only for a few minutes.

Is there hope for the people of northern Pakistan? Yes.

Despite the misery and suffering we saw throughout the region, we also saw children with smiling faces finding their way under new circumstances. For many of them, life is an adventure. They showed a resilience sadly missing on the faces of adults still beset with shock.

The challenge now is to create a long-term, sustainable lifestyle that provides opportunities for those same smiling children.

That means finding the resources to rebuild homes, schools, hospitals and government buildings. It means providing educational opportunities during the rebuilding process and meaningful employment for adults who lost their jobs.

Of all the places I've been privileged to visit, none has provided such a positive opportunity for exercising the goodwill of the United States. It's the right thing to do.

But it's even more than that. In the so-called war on terrorism, there's often rhetoric about "winning the hearts and minds of the people."

Prior to Oct. 8, this region was considered a hotbed of anti-U.S. sentiment with sympathetic leanings toward al-Qaida.

Today, it's a region on its knees and in need of help.

Though it may seem contrary to the images seen on television news, our small documentary crew was welcomed with warmth and smiles.

Even as we visited the tents of people with no resources, we were offered whatever hospitality they had - a cup of tea, a piece of fruit.

Is it conceivable that by doing the right thing, whether individually or as a nation, we might also win the hearts and minds of a proud, intelligent people?

As one who's witnessed the power of goodwill and humanitarian pursuit in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the past few months, I can only attest to my own personal experience in visiting these challenging areas.

The people of this planet, regardless of their faith, ethnicity or economic status, are far more similar than they are different.

The mother who has lost her child is like our mother. The family crippled by poverty or whose home has been destroyed is like our family.

As a nation, we have a long history of resolving conflicts through war and aggression, culminating most recently in our "pre-emptive" invasion of Iraq. The cost in both life and dollars is extraordinary, and there is no end in sight.

As a realist, I'm aware that there are situations where force is the only recourse.

But making a collective shift as a nation to one that builds bridges, creates life-affirming coalitions and works toward a positive embrace of our mutual desire for peace is something we can only do at the demand of the American people.

Pakistan, now reeling from a devastating earthquake and in dire need of international assistance, represents exactly that opportunity.

Chip Duncan is a Milwaukee-area documentary filmmaker.