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Pakistan Earthquake

Relief work pays off

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Immediately after the earthquake, it was decided in a meeting of Labour Relief Campaign (LRC) to target an area devastated by earthquake. There were over 22,000 square kilometres badly affected by the earthquake on 8th October 2005.

The Paniola district of Rawalakot in Kashmir was chosen to concentrate our relief and rehabilitation work. The main reason was our local contacts in the area. Working in an area comprising 38 villages, scattered over 200 kilometres of mountainous area with 62,000 registered votes, was not an easy task. With over 300 casualties, thousands wounded and over 80 percent houses demolished, it was difficult to cover the area with immediate relief and some rehabilitation.

Now after 45 days of the earthquake, there are signs that our relief and rehabilitation work is paying off. I visited the area with two representatives of Action Aid Pakistan on 22nd of November, my second tour of the area since the earthquake. A day long visit gave us some sign of hope; a hope that we saw among the affected people that life must go on and we must rebuild what we have lost. 100 houses are being built in the area with the active participation of the local community. Many have been helped to build some sort of shelter homes to fight the freezing temperatures. Many tents have been erected, provided by LRC and other organizations. Community is there to help each other in every aspect.

We saw the happy face of Nazeeran Bibi, a widow, who told us near the site of her under-construction home that her home will be completed in three days. "I will have a roof once again" she told us with pride. Her house was levelled with the total loss of every household item she had. Nazeeran is at present living in a tent provided by the LRC.

"Who will have the first fifty houses to be built by the LRC?" was a difficult question. It was solved by the local committees by pointing out the neediest and those who had casualties. Women were given the top priority.

Nazar Mohammed, a local teacher and a member of the committee, showed us his house which was not totally demolished but they were not able to live there. "I have not awarded myself a home in this phase because there are more who deserve the priority" he told us. While his mother, an elderly woman, asked us when her turn would be and when we will have the home built. We told her it is the decision of the committee, "Ask your son". "But he is a comrade and is very principled person" she replied.

Nazar Mohammed told us that he got a loan from the government to build his house, which was completed only two months before the earthquake. "I have spent two hundred thousand rupees (US \$3,500) to build the house. It is now a total loss, but the government is still sending us notices to pay the loan". We advised him not to pay the loan and that the LPP will launch a campaign on the issue. It will demand that all the debts of the earthquake area must be abolished.

This is a working class area where most of the men have gone for jobs in different parts of Pakistan. There is neither industry nor an area friendly to agriculture. Most of population depends on the remittances of their family members. Some goats, cows, chickens and buffalo were bringing in some small income. There were some fruit trees but was not sufficient to make a proper living. The area has no large land holding. It was not a tourist area like some other parts of Kashmir and North West Frontier Province. It was an ordinary mountainous area.

It was the first truck load of relief items like cloths, blankets, tents, medicine and food that reached here from the

Relief work pays off

Labour Relief Campaign. Then there were other 10 trucks afterwards that were distributed by newly formed local relief committees.

A team of volunteers from the LRC started work in this area a day after the earthquake. Headed by Nisar Shah, the chairperson of Labour Party Pakistan, it was able to convince the community to form committees at village level to help in distribution the relief items and to organize the rehabilitation.

On 18th October 2005, A Citizen Relief Committee was formed in Lahore and, subsequently, a CRC was also formed in Kashmir. The LRC became part of it to expand the work in this area. The CRC in Kashmir not only helped in the immediate relief work but also played a political role by exposing the militarization of relief work and opposed the intervention of the NATO forces in Kashmir. It issued regular press releases to the national media and tried to break the myth that it is only the religious fundamentalists that are active in relief work.

A mobile medical camp organised by the LRC with the help of Women Workers Help Line treated over 400 women and children in three days: It was the first medical help that came here directly in the community. Another one with 6 doctors and three nurses was planned for three days from November 27th by the same organization.

We give thanks to all the donations that were collected locally, and raised internationally, by the progressive and labour organizations that helped LRC and CRC to bring some hope to the area.

The result is that there is no religious fundamentalist organization in this area that can claim that they the one who did this or that. There is no military government help that has reached here. It is our efforts that have brought some life back to the area.

On the way to Paniloo, we gave a lift to Saeed who guided us to the town. Saeed is a public employee in Islamabad and was not here at the time of earthquake, but he is here to help his village community. I asked him if he knew Nisar Shah, "Yes, from the Labour Party and he is building houses in the area. He has not visited our village but he is coming here, I heard..." That was also the case with two more people we were able to speak with on the way. They all knew the work we are doing.

Nisar Shah told us that word is spreading very fast in Kashmir about our work. Every day I receive delegations from far-off places who want us to help them build their houses. These are the first houses to be completed at the time when many relief organizations are still distributing tents. We are far ahead in our approach of rehabilitation. Winter is approaching and no-one will be able to survive in the tents.

Nisar Shah told us that we were the first ones who distributed iron sheets only after 15 days of the earthquake. These sheets helped many to build some sort of reliable temporary place of shelter. Now, we are the first ones to build proper houses with concrete blocks and iron sheets. They are able to resist the earthquake. Our houses are built with the help of Action Aid Pakistan who have been helped by DFID. [\[1\]](#)

Nisar Shah told us "We have been approached by Shirkat Ghah, the leading womens' NGO in Pakistan, which will help us to build another fifty houses in the area. We are trying to build very low cost homes. So, more shelter homes for more people".

I led many hundreds of my community people to protest at the wrongful distribution of government help by the military authorities on 20th November. It was distributed to only those very few who were somehow close to the military. They invited us to negotiate and we were able to convince them to provide help without any discrimination against anyone.

Relief work pays off

We saw some life coming to the area. In the afternoon, we saw children were coming out of schools in their uniforms. Shops were normally open. Fruits and vegetables were available and super stores were full of every day items. Pakoras and samosas were on sale; so were some locally made sweets and Mathaiy. We did not see people on the main roads waiting for some immediate relief, yet that was the case a month before in most of the roads.

We did not see buffalos, cows and goats. We heard that they were mainly eaten up during the immediate period after the earthquake or they died as the houses collapsed. We saw people working at some sort of construction work. They are not trying to repair the old ones but building new places near the demolished houses.

All is done without any help from the military government according to Arslan, a volunteer of the LRC who has been based here since 11th October. Arslan told us "The government is busy still in the main cities and has forgotten local village areas like this".

How To Donate Money

Labour Education Foundation A/C No. 01801876 Bank Alfalah Ltd., Lda Plaza, Kashmir Road, Lahore, Pakistan
Route:

Please Advise And Pay To CitiBank, New York, USA Swift CITI US 33 For Onward Transfer To Bank Alfalah Ltd., Karachi, Pakistan A/C No. 36087144 And For Final Transfer To Bank Alfalah Ltd., Lda Plaza, Kashmir Road, Lahore, Pakistan Swift: Alfhpkkalda For A/C No. 01801876 Of Labour Education Foundation.

Medicines And Food Can Be Sent To:

Labour Education Foundation, Sufi Mansion, 7 Edgerton Road, Lahore, Pakistan.

Tel: +92 42 6303808, Fax: +92 04206271149

Labour Party Pakistan, 40 Abbot Road, Lahore, Pakistan

Tel: +92 42 6315162

[1] The British Department for International Development.