

THE 1991 BANGLADESH CYCLONE

On May 29/30th 1991 one of the worst cyclones in recorded history hit the coastal areas of Bangladesh from the Bay of Bengal. Wind speeds of 250 kmph and a tidal surge of 10 metres height almost completely destroyed land, property, industry, agriculture and live-stock in these areas claiming a mortality of 20 to 30% of the human population. The environment was rendered hazardous to survivors with dead and decaying human, animal and vegetable matter, lack of the basic survival needs like food, safe drinking water, shelter and a means of livelihood.

The Volags of Bangalore met to respond to this and a team of ten was brought together to be there for a month (sponsored by Service Civil International) in their time of need. This is a summary of the team's experiences with the cyclone victims.

The NGOs in Bangladesh were able to start their relief/rescue operations within 24 to 48 hours and had been on the job for almost a month when we arrived. Their efforts were more purposeful, better co-ordinated and responsive to peoples needs than that of the newly elected Government which was slower off its feet.

The NGO response was initially spontaneous and overlapping in many areas, but had subsequently settled into three phases, with different NGOs taking up responsibilities suitable to their capabilities. The immediate response was for rescue and survival (food, water and temporary shelter) with an intermediate response over the next year or two for permanent shelters and rehabilitation in terms of means of livelihood and economic support. The longer term response is for socio-economic upliftment, building up of communities and a better preparedness

in future disasters. Some NGOs already working in these areas are gearing up to all three phases, while Organisations like Gonoshasthya Kendra (GK) have newly taken up some of the worst hit areas for all three phases.

The conformding factors noticed were,

- all these areas are plains and at sea-level;
- cyclones occur once in two to three years, with major cyclones once in ten to eleven years (associated with the cycle of sun-spot activity);
- floods from the 230 odd tributaries of rivers from the Himalayas occur annually along with the monsoons claiming their toll;
- the literacy levels are below 20%, health facilities and other infrastructure like cyclone-shelters are inadequate and the Status of Women and their participation in community life is abysmal.

The redeeming factors are,

- the commitment, enthusiasm and ability for hard work among the NGOs;
- the pride in the Bangladeshi that he is capable of managing the situation in his/her own way, and
- the unifying factor of a single language (Bangla) throughout the country, a concerned and active student volunteer force, and a strong belief, that INSHALLAH - WE WILL OVERCOME!

-X-X-X-X-X-X-

DR. SHIRDI PRASAD TEKUR,
Community Health Cell,
Bangalore.

06-07-1991